THE MINDFUL WAY THROUGH DEPRESSION

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Depression hurts. It's the "black dog" of the night that robs you of joy, the unquiet mind that keeps you awake. It's the noonday demon that only you can see, the darkness visible only to you.

Anyone who has been visited by depression knows that it can cause debilitating anxiety, enormous personal dissatisfaction, and an empty feeling of despair. It can leave you feeling hopeless, listless, and worn down by the pervasive joylessness and disappointment associated with longing for happiness.

Any of us would do anything not to feel that way. Yet, ironically, not**hing we do seems to help**. At least not for long. For the sad fact of the matter is that once we have been depressed, it tends to return, even if you have been feeling better for months. You may end up feeling that you are not good enough, that you are a failure. Your thoughts may go round and round as you try to find a deeper meaning, to understand once and for all why you feel so bad. If you can't come up with a satisfactory answer, you might feel even more empty and desperate. Ultimately, you may become convinced that there is something fundamentally wrong with you.

But what if there is nothing "wrong" with you at all?

What if, like everybody else who suffers repeatedly from depression, you have simply become a victim of your own very sensible, even heroic, efforts to free yourself - like someone pulled even deeper into quicksand by the struggling intended to get you out?

Recent scientific research has discovered that:

- At the early stages in which mood starts to spiral downward, it is not the mood that does the damage, but how we react to it.
- Our habitual efforts to extricate ourselves, far from freeing us, actually keep us locked in the pain we're trying to escape.

According to Williams, Teasdale, Segal, and Kabat-Zinn, the authors of The Mindful Way Through Depression, antidepressant medications are enormously effective in treating depression for many people.

The problem is that depression, once treated, often returns - and becomes more likely to recur the more often it is experienced. Every time a person gets depressed, the connections in the brain between mood, thoughts, the body, and behaviour get stronger, making it easier for depression to be triggered again. So, it turns out that medication "fixes" depression, but only as long as you keep taking the medication. Very few people like the idea of taking lifelong medication to keep the spectre of depression from the door.

Since the 1970's a body of research has shown that a combination of Western cognitive science and Eastern meditative practices can break the cycle of recurrent depression. Mindfulness, a simple yet powerful way of paying attention to your most difficult emotions and life experiences, can help you break the cycle of chronic unhappiness once and for all. Through insightful lessons drawn from both ancient meditative traditions and cognitive therapy, you can learn to sidestep the mental habits that lead to despair, including rumination and self-blame, so you can face life's challenges with greater resilience.

How Could Mindfulness Help Me?

There are several ways that mindfulness can help reduce the intensity, duration, and frequency of unhelpful habitual response patterns.

- Loosening the grip of habitual responses that cause (additional) suffering. Learning to bring one's attention back to the present moment, including the ever-present process of breathing, over and over again, involves learning to catch oneself entering into habitual patterns that prevent clear awareness of the present moment. With continued practice and increasing development of mindfulness, one becomes increasingly able to notice those habitual reactions that prevent one from responding consciously and constructively.

  For example, instead of realizing 5-10 minutes later that you've been lost in bad memories or fantasies of revenge, you can catch yourself after only 30-60 seconds. Better yet, you can learn to catch yourself in the process of getting

lost in a memory or fantasy. In time, you can increasingly observe these habitual responses as they arise, and choose to respond in other, more skilful ways.

For example, instead of getting really angry at yourself for feeling helpless and sad when someone makes a harsh comment, or feeling guilty when you start thinking of harsh replies, you might notice, without judgment, that you have the habit of responding to harsh comments with (a) feelings of helplessness and sadness, followed by (b) angry thoughts of come-backs, followed by (c) anger and guilt about those initial responses.

Once you notice such common human responses in yourself without judgment, you can choose to bring your attention back to what's actually happening in the conversation now, to consider whether and how you might redirect or end the conversation without creating more negative feelings.

- Reducing the intensity of unhelpful habitual responses.

  The less time a habitual response has to develop, the less likely it will become intense. Of course, some habitual responses happen extremely quickly and almost instantaneously reach high levels of emotional intensity and behavioural impulsiveness. But most of the time, it takes a few seconds for a habitual response to reach a high level of intensity, and "nipping it in the bud" prevents a full flowering of destructive emotion.

  If within the first few seconds you can recognize, with some reflective awareness, that the habitual response is occurring, then you have an opportunity to prevent further escalation. After all, these are chain reactions in the mind and body, and if you can break an early link, you can stop the process.

  The less judgment one has toward a habitual response, the less likely it will become intense. This doesn't mean that one simply accepts one's habitual responses. Rather, it means that you neither accept nor condemn. Instead, you simply observe them for what they are: habitual and, however quirky or bizarre, quite human responses to unwanted experiences. If you can observe these responses without judgment, no matter how immature or unhelpful they may be, you can avoid adding more emotional fuel to the fire.

- Increasing positive emotions.

  One recent study found that novice meditators stimulated their limbic systems - the brain's emotional network - during the practice of compassion meditation, an ancient Tibetan Buddhist practice. That's no great surprise, given that compassion meditation aims to produce the emotional state of "lovingkindness."

  These changes included ramped-up activation of a brain region thought to be responsible for generating positive emotions, called the left-sided anterior region. The researchers found this change in novice meditators who'd enrolled in a course in mindfulness meditation - a technique that borrows heavily from Buddhism - that lasted just eight weeks.

When Unhappiness Turns into Depression

Depression is a huge burden affecting millions today and becoming more common in Western countries, as well as developing countries. Ten million people in the United Sates are taking prescription antidepressants. Around twelve percent of men and twenty percent of women will suffer major depression at some time in their lives.

Forty years ago, depression struck people first, on average, in their 40s and 50s; today it's their mid 20s. At least fifty percent of those find that it comes back. After a second or third episode, the risk of recurrence rises to between eighty and ninety percent. People who first become depressed before they are twenty years of age are at a particularly high risk for becoming depressed again.

We now know that **depression forges a connection in the brain between sad mood and negative thoughts, so that even normal sadness can reawaken major negative thoughts.**

When we become deeply unhappy or depressed, an avalanche of feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviours comes into play, as revealed in the checklist of the hallmark symptoms of major depression below.

Major depression is diagnosed when someone experiences either of the first two symptoms in the following list, and at least four or more of the other symptoms, continuously over all least a two-week period and in a way that departs from normal functioning.

1. Feeling depressed or sad most of the day.
2. Loss of interest or ability to derive pleasure from all or nearly all activities that were previously enjoyed.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting, or weight gain, or a decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
4. Difficulty sleeping through the night or the need for more sleeping during the day.
5. Noticeably slowed down or agitated during the day.
6. Feeling fatigued or a loss of energy nearly every day.
7. Feelings of worthlessness or extreme or inappropriate guilt.
8. Difficulties with concentration or the ability to think, which can also be seen by others as indecisiveness.
9. Recurrent thoughts of death or ideas about suicide (with or without a specific plan for committing suicide) or a suicide attempt.

The huge emotional upheaval that brings a sense of humiliation or defeat is normal. Disturbing emotions are an important part of life. They signal to us and others that we are severely distressed, that something untoward has happened in our lives. **But sadness can give way to depression when the sadness turns into endemically harsh negative thoughts and feelings.**

Feelings

The strength of miserable feelings can vary, from slightly sad to extremely despondent. It's normal for emotions to come and go, but it is rare for depressive feelings to occur by themselves. They often **cluster with anxiety and fear, anger and irritability, hopelessness and despair**. Irritability and angry outbursts are particularly common symptoms of depression, especially in younger people.

The feelings by which we define depression are usually thought of as an end point. We're depressed; we feel sad, blue, low, miserable, despondent, desperate. **But they're also a starting point**; research has shown that the more we've been depressed in the past; the sadder mood will also bring with its feelings of low self-esteem and self-blame. Not only do we feel sad, we may also feel like failures, useless, unlovable, losers.

These feelings trigger powerful self-critical thoughts; we turn on ourselves, perhaps berating ourselves for the emotion we are experiencing; "*This is dumb, why can't I get over this and move on?*" And, of course, thinking this way just drags us down further.

Such self-critical thoughts are extremely powerful and potentially toxic. **Like our feelings, they can be both an end point and a starting point of depression**.

Thoughts

Many situations are ambiguous, but the way we interpret them makes a huge difference in how we react. This is **the A-B-C model of emotions**. The **A** represents the **facts** of the situation - what a video camera would see and record. The **B** is the **interpretation** we give to a situation; this is the "running story: often just below the surface of awareness. It is often taken as fact.

For example, someone you know ignores you when you smile and wave. If we're feeling a bit low that day, our self-talk may tell us that the person deliberately ignored you, that we've lost another friend. Our mind may spin off, **ruminating** about what we did to upset the person. **Negative thoughts often come in disguise, masquerading as questions** that might have answers, for example: "*What have I done? What's wrong with me? Why don't I have more friends?*" Five or ten minutes later, the questions may still be nagging us, with no answers making an appearance.

The **C** of the A-B-C model is our **reaction**; our emotions, body sensations, and behaviour. Often, we see the situation (A) and the reaction (C) but are unaware of the interpretation (B). We think the *situation* itself caused our emotional and physical reactions, when in fact it was our *interpretation* of the situation.

To complicate matters, **our reactions then have an impact of their own**. When we feel low, we're likely to pick out and elaborate on the most negative interpretation. Once we've seen someone pass us on the street and our low mood has brought to mind the interpretation that she "deliberately ignored me," this only makes us feel even lower. In turn, the increasingly deteriorating mood leads to questions about why this person "snubbed me," which only marshals more evidence to support our case of our own unlikability: "*This happened to me just last week with so-and-so; I don't think anybody likes me; I just can't make lasting relationships; What's wrong with me?*"

The stream of thoughts begins to settle on a theme of worthlessness, isolation, and inadequacy.

Themes of worthlessness and self-blame permeate the thoughts of depressed people, as shown in this list compiled by Kendall and Hollon:

Automatic Thoughts of People Currently Depressed

1. I feel like I'm up against the world.
2. I'm no good.
3. Why can't I ever succeed?
4. No one understands me.
5. I've let people down.
6. I don't think I can go on.
7. I wish I were a better person.
8. I'm so weak.
9. My life's not going the way I want it to.
10. I'm so disappointed in myself.
11. Nothing feels good anymore.
12. I can't stand this anymore.
13. I can't get started.
14. What's wrong with me?
15. I wish I were somewhere else.
16. I can't get things together.
17. I hate myself.
18. I'm worthless.
19. I wish I could just disappear.
20. What's the matter with me?
21. I'm a loser.
22. My life is a mess.
23. I'm a failure.
24. I'll never make it.
25. I feel so helpless.
26. Something has to change.
27. There must be something wrong with me.
28. My future is bleak.
29. It's just not worth it.
30. I can't finish anything.

If we're feeling okay at the moment, we might see quite clearly that these thoughts are distortions. But when we're depressed, they can seem like the absolute truth. It's as if **depression is a war, we wage against ourselves, and we marshal every bit of negative propaganda we can muster for ammunition**. But who wins the war?

The fact that we often take these toxic thoughts as unassailable truth only **cements the connection between sad feelings and self-critical thought streams**. When such thoughts have affected us on one occasion, they **remain ready to be triggered on other occasions**. And when they are triggered, they drag our mood down even further, draining what little energy we have at a time when we need all our resources to cope with what has happened to us.

Once these harsh, negative views of ourselves are activated, not only do they affect our mind, they also have profound effects on our body - and then the body in turn has profound effects on the mind and emotions.

Depression and The Body

Depression affects the body - it rapidly leads to **dysregulation of our eating habits, sleep, and energy levels**. We might not feel like eating, or we might overeat. Our sleep cycles can be disrupted. The bodily changes we experience in depression **can in their turn have profound effects on how we feel and think about ourselves**. If the changes in the body wind up activating old themes of how inadequate and worthless, we are, then even minor and temporary changes in the body can make our low mood deepen and persist.

Eighty percent of those who suffer from depression consult their doctor because of **aches and pains** in the body that they cannot explain. Much of this is linked to the **tiredness and fatigue** that come with depression. In general, when we encounter anything negative, the body tends to **tense up**. Our evolutionary history has bequeathed us a body that will prepare for action when it perceives a threat in the environment, such as a tiger, that we need to avoid or escape from. Our heart rate speeds up, our blood is shifted away from the surface of the skin and the digestive tract to the large muscles of the extremities, which tense up in readiness to **fight or flee or freeze.**

However, the most ancient parts of the brain make no distinction between the external threat of the tiger and internal "threats" such as worries about the future or memories from the past. When a **negative thought or image arises in the mind, there will be a sense of contraction, tightening, or bracing in the body** somewhere. It may be a frown, a stomach churning, a pallor in the skin, or a tension in the neck muscles or lower back - all part of a preparation to freeze, fight, or run.

Once the body reacts in this way to negative thoughts and images, it feeds back to the mind the information that we are threatened or upset. Research has shown that the state of our bodies affects the state of our minds without our having any awareness of it. In one study, psychologists asked people to watch cartoons and then rate how funny they were. Some of the people had to do this while holding a pencil between their teeth, so that they inadvertently tightened up the muscles used in smiling. Others had to hold a pencil between pursed lips, which prevented them from smiling. Those who watched using their smiling muscles rated the cartoons as funnier.

These and other similar experiments tell us that when we're unhappy, **the effect of that mood on our body can bias the way we evaluate and interpret things around us without our being even the slightest bit aware that this is happening**. It's not just that patterns of negative thinking can affect our moods and our bodies. Feedback loops in the other direction, **from the body to the mind**, also play a critical role in the persistent return and deepening of unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

The close links between the body and emotion mean that our **bodies function as highly sensitive emotion detectors**. They are giving us moment-to-moment readouts of our emotional state. Of course, most of us aren't paying attention. **We're too busy thinking**.

Many of us have been brought up to to ignore the body in the interest of achieving whatever goals we are striving to attain. In fact, if we struggle with depression, we may feel a strong aversion to any signals that our body may be putting out. Those signals may be **a constant state of tension, exhaustion, and chaos** in the body. We would prefer to have nothing to do with it in the hope that this interior turbulence will subside on its own.

Naturally, not wanting to deal with the aches, pains, and frowns means **more avoidance and therefore more unconscious contraction in the body and the mind**.

Gradually, we slow down and are less and less able to function. Depression has started to affect the fourth aspect of our lives: our behaviour.

Depression and Behavior

When our mood begins to sink and we feel our energy is draining out of us, we may adopt a strategy of **giving up our "unimportant" and "nonessential" leisure activities**, which actually give us pleasure, such as seeing friends or just going out for fun. This strategy makes sense if we think we need to focus our dwindling energies (which we may see as a strictly limited fixed resource) on our more "important" and "essential" commitments and responsibilities. In giving up leisure activities that might have lifted our mood and extended rather than depleted our reserves of energy, we deprive ourselves of one of the simplest and most effective strategies for reversing a decline into depression.

This "giving up" is part of a process of drifting down a funnel of exhaustion. The funnel is created when the circles of our lives become smaller and smaller.

- Sleep problems
- Lack of energy
- Aches and pains
- Guilt
- Joylessness
- Depressed mood
- Exhaustion

Those of us who continue downward are likely those who are **the most conscientious workers**, those whose level of self-confidence is closely dependent on their performance at work, rather than the lazy ones.

Depression makes us behave differently, and our behaviour can also feed depression. Depression certainly **affects the choices we make** regarding what to do and not do, and how to act. If we're convinced, we're "no good" or unworthy, how likely are we to pursue the things that we value in life? And when we make choices informed by a depressive state of mind, they're more than likely to keep us stuck in our unhappiness.

If we have been depressed before, a low mood can become easier and easier to trigger over time, because each time it returns, **the thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and behaviours that accompany it form stronger and stronger connections to each other**. **Eventually, any one element can trigger depression by itself**. A fleeting thought or failure can trigger a huge sense of fatigue. A small comment by a family member can trigger an avalanche of emotions such as guilt and regret, feeding a sense of inadequacy. Because these downward spirals are so easily triggered by small events or mood shifts, they feel as if they come out of nowhere.

The Function of Emotion

On one important level, our emotions are **vital messengers**. They evolved as signals to help us meet our basic needs for self-preservation and safety - to survive individually and as a species. The human emotional repertoire is remarkably sophisticated. Even so, there are really a few **basic families of emotions**. The most prominent are happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger. Each emotion is a full-body reaction to a characteristic situation: fear is triggered when danger threatens; sadness and grief when something precious is lost; disgust when something highly unpleasant is confronted; anger when an important goal is blocked; happiness when our needs are met. Naturally, we pay attention to these signals. They tell us what to do to survive and thrive.

For the most part, our emotional reactions evolved to be **temporary**. They have to be. The **messenger needs to be alert to the need to signal the next alarm**. Our initial reaction lasts only as long as the subject of the alarm continues - often a few seconds rather than a few minutes. For it to last longer would make us insensitive to further changes in the environment. We can see this clearly in the behaviour of gazelle on the African savannah. Fear drives them to run desperately to avoid the predator that is chasing the herd. But once a gazelle has been captured, the rest of the herd rapidly resumes grazing, as if nothing had happened. The situation has changed; the danger is past; the herd also needs to eat to survive.

Of course, some situations endure, and so may our emotional reaction to them. Sadness as a response to the loss of someone dear to us may continue for a long time. Grief can continue to come in unexpected waves that may well up and overwhelm us for many weeks and months after the loss. Even here, however, the mind has ways of healing itself.

Even with grief, most people find that, little by little, life eventually returns to some sense of normalcy and they begin to discover the possibility of smiling and laughing again.

Whey then, do depression and unhappiness outlast the situations that trigger them?

The problem is our own emotional reactions to our emotions.

The problem with persistent and recurrent depression is not "getting sad" in the first place. Sadness is a natural mind-state, an inherent part of being human. It is neither realistic nor desirable to imagine we can or should get rid of it. The problem is what happens next, immediately after the sadness comes. The problem is not the sadness itself, but how our minds react to the sadness: "Get me out of here!"

The fact is that when emotions are telling us that something is not as it should be, the feeling is distinctly uncomfortable. It's meant to be. The signals are exquisitely designed to push us to act, to do something to rectify the situation. If the signal didn't feel uncomfortable, didn't create an urge to act, would we leap out of the path of a speeding truck, step in when we saw a child being bullied, turn away from something we found repugnant? It's only when the mind registers that the situation is resolved that the signal shuts itself off.

When the problem that our emotions signal needs to be solved is "out there" - a charging bull or a roaring funnel cloud - reacting in a way that will allow us to avoid it or escape from it makes sense. the brain mobilizes the whole pattern of mostly automatic reactions that help us deal with whatever is threatening our survival, helping us get rid of or avoid the threat. We call this initial pattern of reactions - in which we feel negatively toward and want to avoid or eliminate something - aversion. Aversion forces us to act in some way to the situation and thereby turn off the warming signal. It can serve us well; it can save our lives. Sometimes.

But it's not hard to see that the same reactions are going to be counterproductive and even dangerous to our well-being when directed at what's going on "in here" - toward our own thoughts, feelings, and sense of self. None of us can run fast enough to escape our own inner experience. Nor can we eliminate unpleasant, oppressive, and threatening thoughts and feelings by fighting with them and trying to annihilate them.

When we react to our own negative thoughts and feelings with aversion, the brain circuitry involved in physical avoidance, submission, or defensive attack (the "avoidance system" of the brain) is activated. Once this mechanism is switched on, the body tenses as if it were either getting ready to run or bracing itself for an assault. We can also sense the effects of aversion in our minds. When we are preoccupied, dwelling on how to get rid of our feelings of sadness or disconnection, our whole experience is one of contraction.

The mind, driven to focus on the compelling yet futile task of getting rid of these feelings, closes in on itself. And with it, our experience of life itself narrows. We feel cramped, boxed in. The choices available to us seem to dwindle.

Mood and Memory

Over our lifetime, we may have come to dislike or even hate emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger, in ourselves and others. We may have picked up the message that expression of these emotions is unseemly and may have assumed that it wasn't okay to feel them either.

More importantly, memories are triggered by mood. A mood functions as an internal context; it brings back memories and patterns of thinking that are associated with times when we were in that mood in the past. When we return to that mood, thoughts and memories related to whatever was going on in our mind or world to make us unhappy will come back quite automatically, whether we want it to happen or not. When the mood comes up again, so do the thoughts and memories connected with it, including the thinking patterns that created that mood.

What if our previous moods of unhappiness or depression were evoked by situations that somehow led to our thinking and feeling that we were not good enough, that we were worthless, or frauds? What if in childhood or adolescence, at a time when we did not have the life skills we now have, we experienced overwhelming feelings of being abandoned, abused, lonely, or just plain not good? Sadly, we now know that many people who become depressed as adults had such experiences. The thinking patterns that made us depressed then, the sense that we are not good enough in some way, are highly likely to be reactivated in the present by even a passing feeling of depression.

This is why we can react so negatively to unhappiness: our experience is not one simply of sadness but is **coloured powerfully by reawakened feelings of deficiency or inadequacy**. Whet may make these reactivated thinking patterns most damaging is that we often **don't realize they are memories at all**. We feel not good enough now without being aware that it is a **thinking pattern from the past** that is evoking this feeling.

Sorting things out and forcing solutions will always seem like the most compelling thing to do - figuring out what it is that is not good enough about us, sorting out what we need to do to minimize the havoc that our unhappiness will wreak in our lives if it persists. But in fact, focusing on these issues in this way is using exactly the wrong tools for the job. It simply fuels further unhappiness and keeps us fixated on the very thoughts and memories that are making us unhappy.

Doing Mode: When Critical Thinking Volunteers for a Job It Can't Do

When the thinking reawakened by depressed mood tells us that **we are the problem, we want to get rid of these feelings right now**. But larger issues have been triggered and dredged up. It is not just that today is not going well, **our whole life feels as if it is not going well**. We feel caught in a prison, and we have to find a way to escape.

The problem is that we try to think our way out of our moods by working out what's gone wrong. "What's wrong with me? Why do I always feel so overwhelmed?" Before we have any idea what's hit us, we're compulsively trying over and over to get to the bottom of what is wrong with us or with the way we live our lives, **and fix it**. We put all of our mental powers to work on the problem, and the power we rely on is that of our critical thinking skills.

Unfortunately, those critical thinking skills might be exactly the wrong tools for the job.

Our critical analytical thinking is one of the highest achievements of our evolutionary history as human beings and does get us out of a whole slew of fixes in life. So, when we see things are not going well **in our internal, emotional life**, it's hardly surprising that the mind often quickly reacts by recruiting the mode of mind that functions so effectively in solving problems **in our external world**.

This mode of careful analysis, problem solving, judgment, and comparison is aimed at **closing the gap between the way things are and the way we think they should be** - at solving perceived problems. Therefore, we call it the **doing mode of mind**. It's the mode by which we respond to what we hear as **a call to action**.

Doing mode is mobilized because it works so well in everyday situations. For making a journey, the doing mode of mind enables us to reach the goal by creating **an idea of where we are now** (at home) and **an idea of where we want to be** (at the mall). It then automatically **focuses on the mismatch** between the two ideas, generating **actions aimed at narrowing the gap** (get in the car and drive). The doing mind continually adjusts our actions as we drive to check whether the actions we make are having the desired effect of decreasing rather than increasing the gap between the two ideas.

Finally, the gap is closed; we've reached our destination, the goal has been achieved, and the doing mode is ready to take on the next task.

If there is something we don't want to happen, we focus on increasing the gap between our idea of where we are and our idea of what we want to avoid. The doing mode of mind underlies all the most awe-inspiring accomplishments of the human species in transforming our outer world, from the construction of the pyramids, to putting a man on the moon.

So naturally, we try to use the same strategies when we want to transform our interior world - to change ourselves so that we can attain happiness or get rid of unhappiness. Unfortunately, this is where things can start to go horribly wrong.

Why We Can't Problem-Solve Our Emotions

In the case of our moods, **the very act of focusing on the gap**, comparing how we feel with how we want to feel (or how we think we should feel) **makes us feel even more unhappy**, taking us even further away from how we want to be.

If the mind is in doing mode - trying to solve "problems" like "What's wrong with me?" and "Why am I so weak?" - **we get trapped in the very thinking that was recruited to rescue us**.

The mind will naturally bring up the relevant ideas it is working on - an idea of the kind of person I am right now (sad and lonely), an idea of the kind of person I want to be (peaceful and happy), and an idea of the kind of person I fear I might be (pathetic and weak). The doing mode then **focuses on the mismatch between these ideas**, the ways in which we are not the people we want to be.

Focusing on the mismatch between our idea of the people we want to be and our idea of the people we see ourselves as makes us feel worse than we did in the first place, when the doing mode started its attempts to help. It uses mental time travel to "help," **calling up past times when we may have felt like this in an effort to understand what went wrong, and imagining a future, blighted by unhappiness, to remind us that this is what we desperately want to avoid**. These images add their own twist to the spiral of worsening mood.

The more we have suffered low mood in the past, the more negative will be the images and self-talk unlocked by our present mood. **But they seem real to us now**. These patterns of feeling worthless or lonely feel familiar, but instead of seeing the feeling of familiarity as a sign that the mind is going down an old mental groove, **we take the feeling of familiarity to mean that it must all be true**.

That is why we can't snap out of it, as our family and friends may be urging. We cannot let go, because the doing mode of mind insists that our highest priority is to sort ourselves out by identifying and solving this "problem." So, we hammer ourselves with more questions: "Why do I always react this way?", "Why can't I handle things better?", "Why do I have problems other people don't have"? "What am I doing to deserve this?"

This self-focused, self-critical frame of mind is called rumination. When we ruminate, we become fruitlessly **preoccupied with the fact that we are unhappy and with the causes, meanings, and consequences of our unhappiness**. If we have tended to react to our sad moods in these ways in the past, then we are likely to find the same strategy volunteering to "help" again and again when our mood starts to slide.

Research shows that our ability to solve problems actually deteriorates markedly during rumination. The stark truth is that **rumination is part of the problem, not part of the solution**.

Spilt Milk

An old dairy farmer in England was talking to a new farmhand who had spilt some milk from the churn and had tried hosing it down with water. The inexperienced farmhand was gazing in despair at the huge white puddle he had created. "Ah," said the farmer, "I see your problem. Once the water has mixed with the milk, it all looks the same. If you've spilt a gallon, it looks like ... well, a bit like that lake you're standing in. The trick is just to deal with milk you've spilt. Let it run off, sweep up what's left into the drain; and when it's pretty clear, then you can hose it down."

The milk the farmhand had originally spilt was now mixed with the water he'd been trying to clear it up with, and **it all looked the same**. And so, it is with our moods. **Our best attempts to clear them up can make them worse, but we don't realize this is what is happening**: it all looks the same and so simply intensifies our desperate attempts to fix things.

Ironically, as all this is happening, the mood that triggered the whole process in the first place may well have moved on. **But we don't notice that it has faded** of its own accord. We're too busy trying to get rid of it and creating more misery in our attempts.

Mindfulness: The Seeds of Awareness

There is an alternative strategy for handling the negative moods, memories, and thinking patterns in the present moment, as they arise. Evolution has bequeathed us an **alternative to critical thinking**, and we humans have only just begun to realize its power to transform us. It is called **awareness**.

In a sense we've been familiar with this alternative capacity of ours all along. It's just that the doing mind has eclipsed it. This capacity does not work by critical thinking but through awareness itself. We call it **the being mode of mind**.

We don't only think about things. We also experience them directly through our senses. We are capable of directly sensing and responding to things like tulips, cars, and a cold wind. And **we can be aware of ourselves experiencing. We can be aware of ourselves thinking; the being mode is an entirely different way of knowing from the thinking of doing mode.**

Not better, just different. But it gives us a whole other way of living our lives and of relation to our emotions, our stress, our thoughts, and our bodies. And it is a capacity that we all already have. It's just been a bit neglected and underdeveloped.

Being mode is the antidote to the problems that the doing mode of mind creates. By cultivating the awareness of being mode we can:

- Get out of our heads and learn to experience the world directly, experientially, without the relentless commentary of our thoughts. **We might just open ourselves up to the limitless possibilities for happiness that life has to offer us**.

- See our thoughts as mental events that come and go in the mind like clouds across the sky instead of taking them literally. **The idea that we're no good, unlovable, and ineffectual can finally be seen as just that - an idea - and not necessarily as the truth, which just might make it easier to discredit.**

- Start living right here, in each present moment. **When we stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, we're open to the rich sources of information we've been missing out on – information that can keep us out of the downward spiral and poised for a richer life.**

- Disengage the autopilot in our heads. **Being more aware of ourselves - through the senses, the emotions, and the mind - can help us aim our actions where we really want them to go and make us effective problem solvers**.

- Sidestep the cascade of mental events that draws us down into depression. **When awareness is cultivated, we may be able to recognize at an early stage the times we are most likely to slide into depression and respond to our moods in ways that keep us from being pulled down further.**

- Stop trying to force life to be a certain way because we're uncomfortable right now. **We'll be able to see that wanting things to be different from the way they are right now is where rumination begins.**

How Mindfulness Changes the Brain

Numerous research studies have demonstrated that the following changes in the structures of the brain can be seen when people practice mindfulness meditation:

Activation of brain regions associated with self-monitoring and cognitive control.

Decreased grey-matter density in the amygdala, which is known to play an important role in **anxiety and stress**.

Stronger activation levels in the temporal parietal junctures, a part of the brain tied to **empathy**.

Change in a self-awareness-associated structure called the **insula**.

Thickening of the cerebral cortex in areas associated with **attention and emotional integration.**

A higher amount of grey matter in the hippocampus, an area that is important with regard to traits like **introspection, self-awareness, compassion** and for memory led learning.

Ramped-up activation of a brain region thought to be responsible for generating **positive emotions**, called the **left-sided anterior region**. Heather Urry and colleagues correlated left prefrontal asymmetry, as evidenced in both the mindfulness and loving kindness forms of meditation, with eudaimonism well-being, defined by Siegel as enveloping "the psychological qualities of autonomy, mastery of the environment, positive relationships, personal growth, self-acceptance, and meaning and purpose in life".

This left anterior activity has also been correlated with resilience, the capacity to rebound after particularly negative experiences (Davidson, et al), which would make mindfulness meditation a viable modality in the treatment of bipolar affective disorder, sufferers of which can experience great difficulty in rebounding after difficult depressive periods.

Decreased activity in an area of the brain called the **default mode network**, a region that is usually at work when the **mind wanders**. A wandering mind is also an unhappy one. This is because when our minds are wandering, most of us are worrying rather than living in the moment. The psychological hallmark of many forms of mental illness - anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia - is a preoccupation with one's own thoughts, specifically the negative ones. These disorders are linked with overactivity or faulty neurological wiring in the default mode network, the brain region that is less active in meditators.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are.

Paying attention to what? you may ask. To anything, but especially to those aspects of life that we must take for granted or ignore. For instance, we may start paying attention to the basic components of experience, like how we feel, what is on our minds, and how we perceive or know anything at all. **Mindfulness means paying attention to things as they actually are at any given moment, however they are, rather than as we want them to be**.

Why does paying attention in this way help?

- Because it is the exact **antithesis tot the type of ruminative thinking** that makes low moods persist and return.
- **Mindfulness is intentional**. It helps us be more aware of present reality and the choices available to us. We can react with awareness. By contrast, rumination is an automatic reaction to whatever triggers us - it is unawareness, being lost in thought.
- **Mindfulness is experiential, and it focuses directly on present-moment experience**. Rumination propels our thoughts into the past or into an imagined future.
- **Mindfulness is non-judgmental, allowing us to see things as they actually are and to allow them to be as they already are**. Judging and evaluating are integral to rumination and the entire doing mode.

Judgment of any sort (good or bad, right or wrong) imply that we or the things around us have to measure up to in some way to an internal or external standard. The habit of judging ourselves severely disguises itself as an attempt to help us to live better lives and to be better people, but in actuality the habit of judging winds up functioning as an irrational tyrant that can never be satisfied.

Moment by Moment

Mindfulness is **not paying more attention but paying attention differently** and more wisely - with the whole mind and heart, using the full resources of the body and its senses. Eventually we might reach the point where every moment of sadness is no longer experienced as a whole life that's gone wrong - but just as a moment that feels sad.

Mindfulness is about the art of **living in the present moment**. When we mentally time-travel, we can easily forget that we are in the present. We become absorbed within ideas of past or future as if we were actually there. We relive remembered emotions or pre-live anticipated ones. Not only do we remove ourselves from the only reality that we can directly experience, the here and the now, but we also suffer the agonies of events that are either long past or that may never actually happen.

In the being mode of mind, we learn to **inhabit the present moment with a sense of spaciousness**. This does not mean that we are forbidden from **thinking about the past or planning for the future;** it only means that when we do think about them, we are aware that **we are doing so**.

Attending to Process Versus Attending to Content

Most of the time, most of us are **lost in the contents of what is running through our minds**. Though fears, cravings and various emotions drive our thought processes, we tend to **get lost in the specifics and details** of our thoughts and memories. Mindfulness meditation teaches us how to observe the processes of our minds and how they work.

For example, when we are experiencing a pain in our body, or a painful memory, we tend to focus on the content of the pain experience and relate to it as something solid and unchanging. When that happens, the pain or memory is experienced the same way we always experience it, with the same predictable results.

However, if we **truly attend to the process** by which sensations of pain or aspects of remembering to arise and change from moment to moment, the experience tends to lose its grip over our awareness and become more tolerable and workable.

When we can **attend to a painful memory as a process that arises and plays out in our mind**, we notice how the images, thoughts, feelings and bodily experiences change from moment to moment, and that experience of remembering involves new learning and opportunities for healing.

Viewing Thoughts as Passing Mental Events

We can learn to observe our thoughts - and our feelings - as experiences that come and go in the mind. Just as the sound of a passing car on the street outside passes, and the sight of a bird in the sky is momentary, the thoughts that come to us are **mental events that naturally arise, stay for a while, and then fade of their own accord**.

This ever-so-simple, yet challenging, shift in the way we relate to thoughts releases us from their control. For when we have thoughts such as "This unhappiness will always be with me" or "I am an unlovable person," **we don't have to take them as realities**. When we do, we succumb to endlessly struggling with them. The reality is that these ideas are mental events akin to weather patterns that our mind is generating for whatever reason in this particular moment.

Living in this moment and treating our thoughts and emotions as **passing messages** similar to sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and touch keeps us from drowning out the signals our senses deliver - signals that can keep us off the road to rumination.

Turning Off the Autopilot

Dieticians have suggested that if we eat without awareness, we end up overweight; we pay no attention to the body's signals of satiation. Likewise, the patterns of the mind that get us stuck in unhappiness are old, over-learned **habits that take control when we're not fully awake and present**. We've passed the reins over to the **automatic pilot of the** mind, creating the conditions in which these subconscious mechanisms can operate freely.

Awareness keeps the old habits favoured by the automatic pilot from having the final say in our behaviour. It enables us to **spot them on the horizon and recognize them for what they are**. Ultimately, we might be able to view our ruminative thought patterns with the same detached, self-compassionate amusement with which we view the lapses that cause us to forget momentarily that our kids have grown up, that our best friend has moved, or that we went shopping because we needed milk.

Opening Up New Options

We often respond to our thoughts and feelings as if they were facts or truths that "demand" or "justify" particular responses. However, it is also possible to **understand and experience our thoughts and feelings as events that arise under certain conditions, and then pass away**. This is true of all sensations, perceptions, feelings, memories, fantasies about the future, and other mental experiences.

Understanding and experiencing our thoughts and feelings in this way opens up some "space" around them. **Instead of the thoughts and feelings having you, and carrying you away, you can experience yourself as having certain thoughts and feelings under certain conditions, and as having options about how you respond to them**. One of the most liberating options is to simply observe thoughts and feelings as arising under certain conditions, and as capable of passing away without you having to do anything else but observe them.

People who cultivate mindfulness are pleasantly surprised when they discover just how many thoughts and feelings that previously seemed so compelling, and seemed to absolutely require and justify habitual reactions, are much better understood and experienced as **sources of information about mental habits which have actually been increasing their suffering**.

For example, consider an emotionally charged thought that often arises in the mind of someone who was deeply hurt as a child: "There must be something about me, something wrong with me that made him (or her) pick me to abuse." It is possible, with practice, for this person to recognize this thought as common and normal, and one that is likely to arise at times of self-doubt and depression.

Then, instead of getting caught up with the thought, one can **attend to the emotional needs** – perhaps for support, help, and encouragement – that created fertile soil for that thought to arise in the first place. Embracing such thoughts and beating up on oneself or trying to push them away or argue with them in your mind, will tend to increase their grip on you.

Viewing such thoughts as an event, and as sources of information about your current state of mind and body, and what will be helpful to you in that state, **opens up all kinds of healthy possibilities and options**.

Mindfulness and Labelling

Labelling refers to **mentally applying a word or brief phrase** to a particular content of experience.

The idea is to **help oneself simply notice** something arising in your experience, without judgment, so that you can get back to observing the flow of experiences arising and passing away. This practice can also eliminate the control of particularly "sticky" thoughts and feelings over one's attention.

For example, one might use the labels "sadness" or "anger" when these emotions arise; or "planning," "worrying," or "remembering" when those common cognitive processes arise. More specific phrases can be used for other experiences, for example, "remembering something painful" or "fearing how others see me."

Some repetitive patterns of thought may be **compared to "tapes" playing in the mind**, and labelled with phrases like, "there's the 'it's my fault' tape," "there's the 'I don't deserve this' tape," or "there's the 'he's such a jerk' tape."

Experiencing Things Directly

Lack of awareness blinds us to other possibilities. In fact, it blinds us to change in general. In doing mode the mind selects only that information that is immediately relevant to attaining that goal.

Without being conscious of doing it at all, we screen out much of what is available to our senses, creating a **veil of ideas that keeps us out of touch with direct experience**. Most of us are unaware how much of life we miss as a consequence.

Have you noticed how often **we mortgage our present moments for some future promise**? Take washing the dishes, for instance. When we are in doing mode, we want to get the dishes done as soon as possible so we can go on to the next activity. We're so preoccupied with other things that we don't give what we're doing our full attention. Finally we do finish, and maybe we sit down for a moment to have that cup of coffee, but we're already preoccupied with the next task we have to do.

For a moment, perhaps out of the blue, we come to our senses and are struck by the empty cup in our hand. "Did I just drink that?" We've actually missed the coffee we had been anticipating sitting down and enjoying while we were doing the dishes, just as we missed **the whole range of sensory experiences** associated with washing the dishes; the feel of the water, the sight of the bubbles, the sounds of the scrubber against the plate or bowl.

In this way, little by little, moment by moment, **life can slip by without us being fully here for it**. If we're not careful, we may actually miss most of our life in this way.

Bare Attention in Mindfulness

In mindfulness bare attention means **attending to sensory experiences** that arise with an object of attention, without distraction or cognitive elaboration.

For example, when attending to your breathing with bare attention, you just notice the sensations of breathing and nothing else. When this is occurring, many subtleties and nuances of breathing, and patterns in these, reveal themselves to you. Also, you are just noticing these sensations as they arise and pass away in the present moment – not thinking about them, not labelling them with language, not associating them with other sensations or patterns you may have experienced before.

With practice, bare attention can be **applied to bodily and emotional responses**, including those triggered by very painful or traumatic experiences. For example, a person might attend to the sensations in her chest, throat, and face that arise when someone raises their voice in anger and reminds her of a hurtful parent.

Focusing on emotions as bodily events while "dropping the story" of verbal thoughts and remembered images and sounds, she can attend with bare attention to what is actually happening in her body now, in the present moment.

This opens new opportunities for learning about her emotional and bodily responses, accepting these as conditioned reactions that arise and pass away, and responding to them in new ways.

Beyond the Usual Goal Focus

Peace can exist only in the present moment. It is ridiculous to say, "Wait until I finish this, then I will be free to live in peace." What is "this"? A diploma, a job, a house, the payment of a debt? If you think this way, peace will never come. There is always another "this" that will follow the present one. If you are not living in peace at this moment, you will never be able to. If you truly want to be at peace, you must be at peace right now. Otherwise, there is only "the hope of peace someday."

Each moment can be embraced as it is, in its full depth, width, and richness, without a "hidden agenda" constantly judging how far our world falls short of our ideas of how we need it to be. What a relief! But it is very important to be clear that, when we let go of constantly evaluating our experience in this way, **we are not left to float, rudderless, without any purpose or aim** to our actions. We can still act with intention and direction; compulsive, habitual, unconscious doing is not the only source of motivation available to us.

We can also take action in being mode. The difference is that we are no longer so narrowly focused on, or attached to, our concepts around goals. This means that we are not quite as upset or as paralyzed when reality does **not conform to our expectations or our goals**.

Alternatively, we might in some moments be very, very upset and perhaps even paralyzed. Yet **by allowing our awareness to include even those feelings, that very gesture of awareness brings with it new degrees of freedom that allow us to be with things as they are - including how we are feeling** – without having to have them different from how they are in this moment.

When we shift from doing mode to being mode, the attendant shift in our awareness can at a stroke cut through the source of much of the additional unhappiness we experience when we are making it worse by becoming **unhappy about our unhappiness, fearful of our fear, angry with our anger, or frustrated with the failure of our attempts to think our way out of our suffering**.

We can refrain from judging and condemning our moods and trying to escape from emotions we don't want to be feeling. We can pull the plug on the habit of depressive rumination, and we have a chance to free ourselves from its relentless pull. We can open to the possibility of feeling a greater sense of harmony and at-oneness with ourselves and the world.

Acceptance in Mindfulness

Accepting the reality of one's current experience is particularly important when it comes to potentially **intense negative emotional responses**. Once such emotional reactions have arisen in one's current experience, neither mindlessly being carried away by them nor attempting to suppress them will be particularly helpful.

The practice of acceptance in mindfulness allows one to see emotional reactions more clearly for what they are – unwanted and intense but passing experiences – and choose how to respond to them, perhaps with acceptance and nothing more.

Accepting rather than rejecting what is happening in the current moment does **not** mean believing or **"accepting" that one can do nothing** to prevent the situation from continuing or getting worse in the next moment.

Nor does it mean accepting and allowing one's own automatic and habitual reactions – no matter how compelling or "justified" such responses may initially feel. Just the opposite: accepting the current moment enables you **not to allow the external situation, or your internal reactions, to rob your capacity for freedom** in the next moment.

Mindfulness is Non-reactivity

Non-reactivity is responding to experiences, including emotions and impulses, **without getting carried away by them or trying to suppress them**.

All organisms, including human beings, are conditioned to **react automatically** to most of the experiences they have. We grasp at what we want and like and push away what we don't want or like. Before we even know it, such **conditioned responses** to stimuli and emotions carry us away.

Mindfulness involves the skill of non-reactively **observing** split-second conditioned reactions, which provides the option of **not acting out the entire chain reaction** that would normally follow. This nonreactivity **opens up space** for new observations, reflections, learning, and freedom. It also saves one from a lot of regrets later.

Approaching Instead of Avoiding

With mindfulness we learn instead of mobilizing fervent efforts to reject the "unacceptable" emotions that pass through us, to meet them with a sense of acceptance. But mindfulness is **not passive resignation**. It is a stance by which we **intentionally welcome and turn toward whatever arises** - including inner experiences that we'd normally fight or try to escape.

Approach and avoidance mechanisms are fundamental to all living systems and to the survival of all organisms, Approach and avoidance circuitry is wired into specific areas of the brain. Mindfulness embodies **approach: interest, openness, curiosity (from the Latin curare, "to care for"), goodwill, compassion**.

The quality of mindfulness is **not neutral or blank** presence. True mindfulness is imbued with **warmth, compassion, and interest**. In the light of the engaged attention, we discover that **it is impossible to hate or fear anything or anyone we truly understand**. The nature of mindfulness is **engagement**: where there is interest, a natural, unforced attention follows.

The **openhearted approach attitude** of mindfulness provides an antidote to the instinctive avoidance that can fuel rumination. It gives us a new way to relate to ourselves and the world, even in the face of external threats and internal stress.

In a psychological experiment psychologist asked students to help a **cartoon mouse find its way out of a maze puzzle**. There were two versions of the task. One was positive, approach-oriented; the other was negative or avoidance-oriented. In the positive condition, there was a piece of Swiss cheese lying outside the maze, on front of the mouse hole. In the negative condition, the maze was exactly the same, but instead of the cheese feast at the finish, an owl hovered above the maze, ready to capture the mouse if it couldn't find its way out.

All the students completed the task in less than two minutes. But the contrast in the **aftereffects** of working on different versions of the maze was striking. When the participants later took a test of **creativity**, those who helped the mouse avoid the owl turned in scores that were fifty percent lower than the scores of the students who had helped their mouse find the cheese. The state of mind elicited by attending to the owl had resulted in a lingering sense of **caution, avoidance, and vigilance for things going wrong**. This mind state in turn weakened creativity, closed down options, and reduced the students' flexibility in responding to the next task.

This is dramatic evidence that **the avoidance system can narrow the focus of our lives**, even when triggered by a purely symbolic threat. If we infuse our attention to our bodily experience with the **approach qualities of interest, curiosity, warmth, and goodwill**, then are directly countering the effects of aversion and avoidance.

Mindfulness and Curiosity

Curiosity is an attitude of interest in learning about the nature of one's experience and mind. Through mindfulness, **this quality of mind can be brought to a much greater range of experience** than we ordinarily do. When it comes to things we want, we tend to just go after them based on prior conditioning. When it comes to experiences that we don't want, including painful memories and emotions, we tend to just push them away and avoid them.

We tend to reserve curiosity for things and experiences that are new and at least somewhat positive. But with mindfulness, we can **bring curiosity to the full range of our experience** and discover much that is new and enlightening. We can discover that experiences which would ordinarily just evoke automatic conditioned reactions are opportunities to apply curiosity and learn a great deal about how our mind works, including how it can increase our suffering by imposing old conditioning on new situations.

For example, it is possible to bring curiosity to the way a reminder of past betrayal by someone we loved triggers memories, which in turn trigger automatic responses like sadness, shame, or anger, and/or craving for alcohol, sex, or some other "fix." When such reactions are experienced with mindful curiosity, they can **become opportunities for learning, for being gentle and kind toward oneself in the midst of such responses, and for discovering new ways of responding**.

Patience in Mindfulness

Patience means accepting a slow pace of change; **bearing unwanted, difficult or painful experiences with calmness**.

As soon as we attempt to follow the sensations of breathing without distraction, we discover just how out of control our minds are. Even after years of mindfulness meditation practice, most people will not have unbroken control over where their attention is directed for more than a few moments at a time. But experiencing this fact over and over again, and repeatedly observing – with acceptance, non-reactivity, and curiosity – that one's mind has wondered or been carried away in a chain reaction of conditioned thoughts and feelings, is a wonderful way to cultivate patience.

And these experiences can translate to daily life, enabling us to **become more patient with ourselves and others as we all continue to fall into habitual responses that increase our suffering**.

Another meaning of "patience" refers to calmly bearing unwanted, difficult or painful experiences. In the Buddhist tradition, the term "**equanimity**" is often used. Mindfulness practice provides repeated opportunities to observe the arising of unwanted, difficult and painful experiences and one's habitual reactions to them.

Again, as the observation of such experiences increasingly includes acceptance, non-reactivity and curiosity, one's patience grows and can be spread to other experiences in one's daily life.

How Can I Cultivate Greater Mindfulness?

There are many different kinds of meditation, from many different traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

As with meditation, unless you have seriously studied Buddhism, you are likely to have some questions and misconceptions about it. I have read many books over the years and used many practices from different Buddhist traditions. However, I am not an expert on Buddhism, so I will limit comments here to these two:

Buddhist ideas and practices related to mindfulness have been developed and refined within an extremely rigorous research tradition. This tradition is focused on transforming one's attention into a suitable tool for **directly investigating the nature of mind and experience, with the goal of reducing and eliminating ignorance, confusion, and suffering – and increasing freedom and happiness**.

The focus on **training and refining one's own mind** is very different from the research traditions of **Western science**, which have developed powerful methods for studying **other people's minds and brains**. But the two approaches are absolutely compatible. Even more important, they are complementary – as increasing numbers of psychology and neuroscience researchers are discovering.

Buddhist ideas and practices related to mindfulness are **completely compatible with faith in or practice of any other religion, or atheism or agnosticism**. They are tools for taming, understanding, and increasing the freedom of your own mind; therefore, they can increase your ability to live according to the principles of any religion, or any system of values and morals.

Mindfulness of Routine Activities

The idea is to bring gentle attentiveness to whatever we are doing. We bring a fresh quality of deliberate moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness to whatever we're doing. The aim is not be hyper-attentive or to bring greater strain or self-consciousness to these routine actions. Actually, we might find that bringing mindful awareness to things reduces effort and the makes the activity easier. Bringing awareness to activities of daily living makes it much easier to notice when we are operating in the doing mode, on automatic pilot, and provides us with an instant alternative, namely, an opportunity to enter and dwell in the mode of being. In this way, we are knowing full well what we are doing while we are doing it. Here are some examples of possible activities:

- Washing the dishes
- Loading the dishwasher
- Taking out the garbage
- Brushing your teeth
- Taking a shower
- Doing the laundry
- Driving the car
- Leaving the house
- Entering the house
- Going upstairs
- Going downstairs

Using driving as an opportunity to cultivate mindfulness in daily life. For many people, driving typically involves not just driving but listening to the radio, talking on the phone, or getting lost in memories and plans. Especially if you are in a rush, driving can create stress and even result in anger and aggression toward other drivers. But driving can be an opportunity to whole-heartedly pay attention to the experience of driving, including how you react to the behaviour of other drivers.

When used as an opportunity to practice mindfulness and kindness (e.g., thinking toward other drivers, even aggressive ones, "may you be happy, may you be free of stress"), driving can be an opportunity to neutralize bad habits, cultivate helpful skills, and arrive at your destination more mindful, calm, and kind than when you got into your car.

The Fresh Air of Awareness

If you've ever bought an old house, you'll know that **dry rot** is a major concern. To deal with this problem, **air circulation** is very important. Dry rot spores cannot survive well where there is a fairly constant exposure to fresh air. Air-vents may help to keep the timber well ventilated. The spores may still be around and settle on the wood, but with fresh air around they will not thrive.

In a similar way, we could say that **stress, fatigue, and afflictive emotions thrive in the absence the fresh air of awareness**. It is not that, with awareness, they cease to exist, but that awareness puts more space around them, as such spaciousness provides an environment in which the self-diminishing and constricting frames of mind can no longer thrive. Mindfulness detects them earlier on, sees them more clearly, and notices how they arise and can pass away.

The Breath - Gateway to Awareness

Historically, many different objects of attention have been used to gather and steady the mind, form a gently flickering candle flame to a sound such as "om" repeated silently in the mind. Intentionally **focusing the mind on one object activates the brain networks corresponding to the focus of attention, and at the same time, inhibits the networks corresponding to competing demands for attention**, without the need for force. It's as if the brain "lights up" the selected object while also "dimming" the unselected objects.

Traditionally, this harnessing of the mind's own natural capacities for calm and clarity is nicely captured by the image of a **glass of muddy water**. As long as we keep stirring the water, it will stay opaque and cloudy. But if we have the patience to simply wait, the mud will eventually settle at the bottom of the glass, leaving clear, pure water above. In the same way, our attempts to steady, calm, or control our mind often merely stir things up and make everything less clear. But we can get out of our own way and **stop contributing to the cloudiness of the mind by encouraging it to alight and dwell on a single object of attention for a time**.

From ancient times, the **breath has served as a convenient object** for the purpose of focusing our attention. The intention is to attend as best you can to the constantly changing pattern of physical sensations as the breath moves in and out of the body.

Sooner or later (usually sooner), the **mind will wander away** from the breath sensations, getting caught up in thoughts, planning, or daydreams, or just aimlessly drifting about. Whatever comes up, whatever the mind is pulled to or absorbed by, is **perfectly okay**. This wandering and getting absorbed in things is simply what minds do; it is not a mistake or a failure. When you notice that your awareness is no longer focused on the breath, you might want to actually **congratulate yourself because you've already come back** enough to know it.

You might like to briefly acknowledge where the mind has been (noting what is on your mind and perhaps making a light mental note: "thinking" or "planning" or "worrying"). Then, **gently escorting your attention back to the breath** sensations, as you bring your awareness to the feeling of **this** in-breath or **this** outbreath, whichever is there as you return.

Do **bring a quality of kindness to your awareness**, perhaps seeing the repeated wanderings of the mind as opportunities to cultivate greater patience and acceptance within yourself and some compassion toward your experience.

Learning to **focus, refocus, and refocus our attention** on the breath offers a wonderful way to learn how we can be fully present right here, right now. Because we can attend to the movements of the breath only in the very moment in which they are arising, attending to the breath holds us in the present and provides a vital **anchor line with which we can reconnect to the here and now** when we recognize that our mind has travelled to the "there and then."

A Mindfulness of Breathing Practice

Sit comfortably with your spine straight, in a relaxed way, on a straight-backed chair or cushion on the floor. It is important that your spine is straight, and your body relaxed, to promote mental alertness and clarity. Sitting this way may be a new experience, and you may need to experiment a bit.

Establish a proper motivation before beginning the practice. For example, you might affirm the intention to simply use your breath as an anchor for being mindfully aware of your experience in each moment, with a sincere desire to learn something new, with an **attitude of open-minded curiosity**.

Close your eyes. (If this doesn't feel comfortable, or feels like too much vulnerability to internal sensations, keep your eyes open and gaze at the floor about 5 feet in front of you with a soft focus, not attending to anything in particular.) As you inhale and exhale naturally, **bring your attention to the sensations of your flowing breath**, either at the tip of your nostrils or in your abdomen.

Take a moment to **notice the sensations of touch and pressure** where your body makes contact with the chair or cushion and the floor, and any sensations that might indicate tension in your body. Just notice these sensations with curiosity and acceptance. If you need to slightly adjust your posture, that's fine, but if some tension or pressure won't go away, that's OK too, so long as it's not painful (in which case you may need to try sitting on something else).

Consciously and deliberately take a few deep breaths, but do not strain. The idea is to emphasize the movement and sensations, to clarify what you are attending to.

Now **allow the breath to find its own natural rhythm**. Allow the body to breathe on its own, without attempting to change it in any way. Shallow or deep, fast or slow, it's OK. Allow the inhalations and exhalations to come and go, just noticing the sensations of your flowing breath at the tip of your nostrils or in your abdomen. You may notice the slight pauses between each in-breath and out-breath.

Gently and without wavering, allow your attention to rest or float on the changing rhythms of your inbreaths and out-breaths. **Whenever your attention wanders or loses its alertness – and it often will – gently but firmly bring your awareness back to the breath** and observe with fresh curiosity the sensations as they arise and pass away.

It is totally natural for your mind to wander, and nothing to be concerned about. Again, when you notice that you mind has wandered, gently and firmly bring it back to the breath with fresh curiosity and alertness.

If you find yourself judging yourself when you discover that your mind has wandered, instead briefly congratulate yourself for making the discovery – then go gently and firmly back to your breath...

Bringing the mind back to the breath trains the mind to be attentive and mindful. It takes effort, but slowly the mind will grow stronger.

Continue with this practice for **15-20 minutes**, or just 10 minutes or less if that feels like enough for the first time. During this time, sometimes when you find that your attention has wandered, you might remind yourself of your intention: simply to use your breath as an anchor for being mindfully aware of your experience in each moment.

If at any time you find yourself becoming not just perturbed but overwhelmed by feelings or memories, immediately stop and do something (healthy) that you would normally do to cope with these experiences.

Eckhart Tolle (A New Earth) recounts an incident where someone showed him the prospectus of a large spiritual organization containing a veritable smorgasbord of seminars and workshops. The person asked Eckhart to help him to choose one or two courses. "I don't know," Tolle replied. "They all look so interesting. But I do know this," he added. "**Be aware of your breathing as often as you are able, whenever you remember. Do that for one year, and it will be more powerfully transformative than attending all of these courses. And it's free**."

Listen to the free flow of your breath. The breath energizes and sustains every cell of our body. It nourishes everything in its path. It is like the freshness of water. It is with us every second of our lives, but most people pay little attention to it.

Our breath is **mainly automatic and unconscious and regulated by the instinctive and primitive involuntary or autonomic nervous system**. Autonomic is derived from the word 'autonomy', it has the quality of being 'independent' of the conscious, voluntary mind.

By practicing conscious breathing, we gradually **strengthen the connections between our unconscious, autonomic reactions and our voluntary, or consciously chosen responses**. This strong bridge between the primitive "lower" mind and the "higher" mind enables us to mend the split between the raw reactions that ruin our relationships, and the wise responses that we could choose to nurture our love.

Breathe a shining light into your mind. Conscious breathing builds the connections between the limbic system (the emotional brain) and the neocortex (the rational part of the brain).

Breath awareness shines a light into the workings of our mind. By observing the mind (thoughts, emotions, desires, intentions, perceptions and expectations) we can free ourselves of the knots that bind. **Observing the breath allows us to take a deep look at the nature of mental formations** such as fear, anger and anxiety and helps to bring about an understanding of how our mind works. To improve your mind, you need to be aware of how it works.

The breathing process is connected directly to the brain and the central nervous system. The breath can **control the flickering nature of the mind**. Breath awareness serves another function, because it **trains your mind to stay focused** on a natural - and essential - body process. By focusing your conscious intention on your breath, you begin to slow down mental "busy- ness." Your thoughts become fewer and more integrated, and your body begins to relax.

Many people's breath is unnaturally shallow. The more you are aware of your breath, the **more the natural depth will re-establish itself**.

Lovingkindness - An Essential Companion of Mindfulness

The non-judgmental quality of mindfulness is very important. However, the **absence of judgment** toward unwanted experiences is necessary but not sufficient. We also need to cultivate the **presence of kindness** – toward ourselves, toward others, and toward the inevitable unwanted, painful and otherwise distressing experiences in life.

There are two especially important forms of basic human kindness, which Buddhists refer to as "lovingkindness" and "compassion." These are ways of relating to ourselves and others that promote acceptance, calmness, happiness, and freedom. While lovingkindness and compassion are (moral and ethical) ideals for relating to others, they are also mental qualities essential for achieving greater peace, freedom, and happiness.

"Lovingkindness" is an English translation of the word "**metta**" from Pali, a language used to record the early teachings of Buddhism. The word has two root meanings, "**gentle**" and "**friend**," and the foundation of lovingkindness is being a gentle friend to yourself, no matter what kind of experience you happen to be having in the moment.

Lovingkindness refers to an **unconditional and open love**. This is not the kind of "love" that has requirements and conditions attached to it ("I love you because...", "I'll love you if..."), or that only accepts pleasant experiences and thus distorts one's perceptions based on wishes and illusions.

Lovingkindness is not bound up with personal agendas or desire. Lovingkindness **does not want things – including unwanted experiences – to be anything other than they actually are, in the present** moment. Instead, the present moment and current experience are embraced. Paradoxically, this makes even unwanted and painful situations more "workable," by providing **other options for responding than automatic and habitual reactions** which cause more problems and suffering.

Accepting rather than rejecting what is happening in the current moment does **not mean** believing or "accepting" that one can do nothing to prevent the situation from continuing or getting worse in the next moment. Nor does it mean blindly accepting and simply allowing one's own automatic and habitual responses – no matter how compelling or "justified" such responses may initially feel.

Just the opposite: accepting the current moment enables you **not to allow** the external situation, or your internal reactions, to rob your capacity for freedom in the next moment.

It's not about "letting down your guard," but rather guarding your mind – guarding it from being carried away with automatic, habitual, and unhelpful responses based on reactions to past hurts; guarding it from being consumed by fear and self-defence rather than being supported by clear perception, effective reasoning and wise choices about how to **respond skilfully** and without worsening the situation.

With lovingkindness, **taking care of oneself and responding compassionately to others are not in conflict**, but go hand in hand. Most of us sometimes "defend" ourselves when it's not necessary or respond with more extreme self-protective measures than are required or helpful in a particular situation. And most if not all of us think we were "just trying to defend myself" when attacking another person. Lovingkindness practices can reduce and eventually help to eliminate these habitual ways of thinking and behaving.

Lovingkindness Practice

Sometimes it can be hard to feel kindness (especially if you've experienced a lot of hurt and betrayal in your life). Try starting with something simple:

The starting point is to **imagine a person or animal that spontaneously and irresistibly evokes feelings of kindness**. Picture them in a peaceful quiet setting, like a nice field of grass.

This could be a person – for example, a baby, a niece or nephew, another little child, or a much-loved grandparent who is still living or has passed away. If you choose a person, it's important that it not be someone for whom you have any mixed feelings, otherwise they could get in the way.

Or it could be a cute little puppy, kitten, or other baby animal, or a group of them.

Notice the feeling you get when you imagine this person or animal. Notice whether your body changes, any internal sensations of kindness.

If you can feel this kind and warmth feeling, give yourself a minute to continue imaging the person or animal and feeling that warmth, and the attitude of gentle friendliness that goes with it.

If you don't feel the kindness and warmth initially, give yourself some time, and experiment with images, until you find one that helps you have some feelings of safety and comfort. Then give yourself a minute to continue having those feelings and imagine wishing them for a lovable person or animal.

Notice the kindness behind your wish and give yourself some time to experience that kindness and feelings of warmth that go with it.

Then bring to mind an image of yourself as a young child. Move the kindness from the other person or animal to yourself. If the young image of yourself is too young for words, simply hold your hands over your heart.

If you wish to use words, gently add the phrase "may I love myself just as I am" while holding your heart. Other lovingkindness phrases are, "may I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be safe, may I be free of suffering," but feel free to make up your own, whatever works for you.

Jeff Cannon writes, "In practicing metta (lovingkindness) we do **not have to make** certain feelings happen. In fact, during practice we see that we feel differently at different times.

Any momentary emotional tone is far less relevant than the considerable power of intention we harness as we say these phrases. As we repeat, 'May I be happy; may all beings be happy,' we are planting seeds by forming this powerful intention in the mind. The seed will bear fruit in its own time..."

"Doing metta, we plant the seeds of love, knowing that nature will take its course and in time those seeds will bear fruit. Some seeds will come to fruition quickly, some slowly, but our work is simply to plant the seeds. Every time we form the intention in the mind for our own happiness or for the happiness of others, we are doing our work; we are channelling the powerful energies of our own minds. Beyond that, we can trust the laws of nature to continually support the flowering of our love."

Slowing Down Thoughts in Mindfulness

The more one practices just noticing thoughts and bringing attention back to the breath (or other current sensations in the body), the more "gaps" occur between chains of thoughts and the individual thoughts within them. Your thoughts become less compelling and demanding of your attention and energy.

The continual inner "chatter" and images of the past and future don't go away, since that's the nature of the human mind. But they do "settle down." And this slowing and settling down of mental processes, particularly when you don't need them to be moving quickly, brings relaxation, and brings the freedom to choose what to think about rather than being dragged along. This effect is often experienced after only 10 or 15 minutes of mindful attention to one's breathing.

One way to convey this is imagining your mind as an excited puppy – running after every bone it sees, even sticks and rocks, anything that gets its attention, scurrying from one to the next as fast as it can. Like the immature puppy, your mind needs training to slow down and serve your needs rather than being carried away by emotions and distractions.

If you can cultivate the ability to slow down your mind by practicing mindfulness, you can bring this ability to times of pain and suffering. Instead of jumping quickly from an experience in which you feel sad (or helpless or disrespected or whatever) to feelings of anger, shame and guilt – and before you know it finding yourself in a blizzard of negative thoughts, feelings and memories – the outcome can be different.

You might notice the chaining of one brief negative mental state to another, and the links and gaps between them, and be able to choose another direction, like calming yourself, reminding yourself to focus on what brought up the negative feelings in the first place, or bringing your attention back to the current situation and your goals for it.

Being aware of your breath forces you into the present moment - the key to all inner transformation. **Whenever you are conscious of your breath, you are absolutely present**. You may also notice that you cannot think and be aware of your breath. Conscious breathing stops your mind.

Increasing the Spaciousness of Present Awareness

Think of a time you were really stressed recently. Not only were your thoughts moving really fast, and probably somewhat out of control, but your current awareness was "clogged" with negative thoughts, feelings, memories, images, etc. For most people, most of the time, not just when they're stressed, their current awareness is virtually packed with thoughts, feelings, images, etc. – and not only about what they're currently doing.

By practicing focusing your attention on the present, and gently **coming back to the present when you've wandered into the past and future again, you can expand your present awareness**. Not only does the present moment become more vivid and fresh, but your awareness becomes more spacious, less clogged with extra and unnecessary thoughts, feelings and images.

You can probably remember what this experience is like, by remembering a time when you were calm, relaxed, and not under pressure to do anything - maybe lying on the beach several days into a vacation, or on a long and relaxing hike in nature.

The more spacious your present awareness, the less likely that negative thoughts, feelings, and memories, when they inevitably arise, will dominate your experience and become overwhelming.

With a more spacious awareness, you can have unwanted and painful experiences but have enough "mental space" to remember and experience positive and healthy thoughts, memories, and images of your future. You can tap into larger perspectives on your life and who you are, what you have accomplished, and what you are capable of achieving.

Sky Mind Exercise

Try a "sky mind" exercise with a difficult response or emotion (but not yet one that's really difficult). As the negative experience arises, **close your eyes and imagine your mind getting bigger and bigger** to hold it. Imagine your mind as wide as the sky.

When you feel your mind as wide as the sky, where is the difficulty then? What happens to it? How does it feel in this "big mind?" This is an experience and ability that, with practice, you can bring to increasingly difficult and painful experiences.

Functionally, making the mind bigger is like this: If you put a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water it will taste very salty and be hard to drink. But if you put that salt into a lake, you won't even be able to taste it. Like the "sky mind" practice, mindfulness is about **expanding the container for difficult emotions**, like pouring salty water from a glass into a lake.

When you have that more spacious mind, watch how thoughts come and go and come and go. Thoughts and feelings are always arising and passing away. It is their nature to do this. In some ways, simply seeing this can help us relax and not worry about them. Spaciousness of mind allows this to happen.

Christian Mindfulness

Mindfulness has a bad press in Christian circles. However, Phil Monroe writes that it is important to point out that Buddhism is not the only religion that espouses meditational practices. **Christianity, from the beginning of the Church, has promoted the concept of meditation.**

We are all looking for relief from the chaos and violence in our own minds. Most people don't know that we Christians have inherited many spiritual tools to help us break through the cloud of gnats and mosquitoes in our minds that we call obsessive thinking, worry, anxiety and habitual fear.

For example, one of the Christian Desert Fathers, the monk **Evagrius Ponticus** (345-399 A.D.), taught a form of **hesychasm (Greek: quiet)** in which one comes to see the conditioned links between thoughts and emotions, and then, through meditation and prayer, finds a deep calm called **apatheia**. In apatheia the mind is integrated and purified of its naturally tumultuous activity, allowing one to simply **"be" in God's presence** or to pray without distraction.

Some other Christian contemplatives would describe this emptying of the mind as a kind of on-going detachment from chaotic thoughts. It's not that thinking goes away - sometimes our thoughts may bring blessings or healings! - but that we **experience an inward spaciousness** so that we are not so caught up in our own thoughts and worries. When we have this kind of detachment, we are less likely to mistake our thoughts and opinions for our present reality.

The methods by which one trains and purifies the mind were codified by Evagrius's student, **St. John Cassian** (360-435) in his Conferences, and taken up by **St. Benedict**, Eastern Orthodox theologians such as Symeon the New Theologian, the German friar **Meister Eckhart**, the anonymous author of the medieval Cloud of Unknowing, **St. John of the Cross** and, most famously, in the works of 20th century's **Thomas Merton**.

In Philippians (2:5ff), **St. Paul writes that Jesus "emptied himself" (Greek: kenosis)**, taking the form of a servant. Jesus's many acts of service and healing did not come from a mind that was thinking and analysing about what to do or say, but rather from a mind that had emptied itself into God. **In his "emptiness," God's infinite love could shine through** Jesus's human form unencumbered. Through him, the invisible could become visible. In this way, the purified Christian mind is analogous to Tibetan Buddhist emptiness and to Zen's "no-thought-ness" (Jap. munen).

The medieval Dominican friar Meister Eckhart taught that detachment (emptying ourselves) from every self-centred affinity and fear is such an important spiritual practice that he, with tongue in cheek, put it **above love**. Even our ideas about God can lead us away from God, so we must walk lightly among them too.

This discipline requires effort and love, a careful cultivation of the spiritual life, and a watchful, honest, active oversight of all one's mental attitudes toward things and people. One must learn **an inner solitude**, wherever or with whomsoever he may be. Trusting in God's invisible presence one's mind comes to a **still point of presence** he called **Gelassenheit, a complete letting-be**.

From the Desert Fathers and from the Greek philosophers before them, Eckhart inherited the insight that **our eyes must be without any colour in order to be able to register all colours**. Dwelling in this detachment from our personal ideas about reality, we come to a consciousness that St. Paul described when he declared, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Christ has colourless eyes. We too can have the "empty" or "detached" mind and heart of Christ that sees all colours and registers all suffering and joy. Eckhart describes the Christ-mind's way of knowing as **"daybreak knowledge" in which all things are perceived without distinction as coming forth from, and going to, the light of God**.

Similarly, in the 16th century, St. John of the Cross counsels that we Christians must also occasionally enter a dark night of the senses and soul, emptying ourselves of our self-centred preferences and ideas about God and everything else. We must become **inwardly detached in an ambience of love that continuously connects us to others and to creation**. Our contemplative tradition tells us that when we open ourselves to the Divine movement within, **the Holy Spirit will help us** do this work. We do the work of creating a space within us for God, and then trust that the Holy Spirit will do the work in us: as we flow out of ourselves, the Holy Spirit flows in.

St. John of the Cross tells us that this emptying is a kind of "darkening" whereby **we become naked before God and with God**. Paradoxically, **it is a darkening that brings Light**. In this dark night of the mind the invisible God of love transforms us, freeing us from our cocoons of fear, anxiety and blame.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, called this Christian practice **Indiferencia or "holy indifference".** In this view, one stops trying to control God. One trains one's mind to **seek God in all things evenly**, to have no personal preference for where God will show up.

Christian Blessing for Lovingkindness Practice

Numbers 6:24-26
"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Psalm 121:7-8
"The LORD will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."

Romans 15:33
"The God of peace be with you all. Amen."

1 Corinthians 1:3
"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Galatians 6:18
"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, sisters and brothers. Amen."

Paying Attention and Letting Go

A relationship can force us to revisit every feeling and memory in the legend of ourselves. In our **psychological work** of addressing, processing, and resolving emotional blocks and problems, we **pay attention to thoughts and feelings,** explore their implications, and hold them until they change or reveal a path that leads deeper into ourselves.

In our **spiritual practice** of mindfulness, something very different occurs; we **let feelings and thoughts arise and let them go**. We do not process them, nor do we hold them. Each of these approaches has its proper time, and we need both of them.

Paying attention and letting go are the twin tools of mindful relationships. Therapy without mindfulness takes us only to the point of resolving our predicament. Mindfulness with therapy helps us to dissolve the ego that got us into it in the first place.

From concepts and methods to reliable skills. Like everything else that requires practice, the development of mindfulness first involves learning some concepts, and some methods to practice.

The methods are practiced over and over again, first only in very structured situations, eventually in all kinds of situations. In this way, what were initially only concepts become realities – real skills that one can reliably and flexibly apply in all kinds of situations. The concepts are pointers, guides, and "training wheels" that become less and less necessary as one's skills are strengthened.

Practice: Establish A Base or Safe Place

First, choose an object of attention that can provide a "base" and "safe place" to come back to when experiences threaten to become overwhelming. People often choose their **hands, feet, or the centre of their belly** as a comfortable or neutral place. For others **the breath** will work, or a **comforting phrase**, or an **image or memory of a safe place or person**.

Practice gently bringing your attention back to this base whenever it becomes distracted or pulled along by something else.

In all meditation traditions, **cultivation of focused attention** precedes cultivation of the open attention associated with mindfulness. For people who can become overwhelmed by "opening" to whatever arises in their experience, including painful feelings and memories, it is even more important to practice focusing one's attention on one object and repeatedly bringing attention back to it.

The idea is not that you will never get distracted (only very advanced meditators achieve this), but that you will usually **be able to bring your attention back** soon after it has wandered (i.e., within 10-20 seconds), and sooner when it wanders into emotionally painful territory (i.e., 1-5 seconds).

Once you have achieved some skill at concentration, when a difficult emotion, sensation or memory arises during meditation, you can choose to **"touch up against it" in small increments**. Briefly touch the pain with your attention, and then back off and return to your safe object of attention until you feel the strength and presence to touch the difficult experience again.

Other ways to back off include **opening your eyes and focusing on something you can see or switching to a lovingkindness or compassion practice**.

Such gradual, tolerable and deliberate re-experiencing of painful feelings and memories can modulate their intensity and foster increasing confidence and mastery. It really is possible to relate to painful experiences and memories without trying to escape or becoming overwhelmed.

Noticing and Enjoying Positive Emotions in Mindfulness

Stressful times, and too much of life in general, can involve repeatedly focusing on difficult experiences and unpleasant emotions. It's extremely important to **train the mind to notice and enhance positive emotions** too.

Mindfulness can help you notice the positive emotions that spontaneously arise in your experience. If you're going through your life feeling down much of the time, re-experiencing negative emotions resulting from past negative experiences, it can become hard even to notice positive emotions. Or positive emotions can be swamped and overwhelmed by more familiar negative ones before you even notice.

Practicing bringing your attention to whatever arises in the present moment, and noticing it without judgment, makes you much more likely to notice positive experiences and emotions and much less likely to judge or dismiss them.

Particularly when your mind is moving more slowly, and is relatively spacious, positive feelings have an opportunity to grow, last longer and lead to other positive feelings. And many positive emotions, particularly **feelings of appreciation, kindness and love, help to enhance the mind's calmness**.

For many people, particularly who had painful childhoods, **active and disciplined** efforts are necessary to generate and nurture positive feelings. To play a musical instrument, or be successful at a sport, we must **practice**. That's how our brains work. So of course, it can be helpful to practice cultivating and maintaining positive emotions.

For starters, you might try this exercise: **Make a list of positive emotions**. Take a day to practice noticing positive emotions as they occur. When did you feel joy today? Curiosity? Ease? Pleasure? Humour? Affection?

Even in the most depressed person, positive emotions happen many times a day. Just noticing these can **challenge such assumptions** as "I'm sad all the time," or "I was anxious all day." It is also useful to **look for neutral moments**. Were there moments today when you didn't feel difficult emotions? When you were brushing your teeth? Drinking a glass of water? Reading?

Many people have learned to **block out feelings**, or never learned how to be aware of some, which means they often don't recognize an emotion in themselves until it's become extreme. This does not mean that one lacks emotional responses to things that happen, just that one's emotions are mostly operating out of awareness and on "autopilot." This can be particularly true for people who have **numbed themselves** to their emotions with addictive relationships to alcohol, drugs, food, pornography and other "fixes."

Compassion in Mindfulness

"Compassion" is an English translation of the Pali term "karuna." As Sharon Salzberg explains, karuna means "experiencing a trembling or quivering of the heart in response to a being's pain."

The compassionate response of the heart involves **engaging with pain – gently, with acceptance and strength – not being overwhelmed by it**. Many of us have learned first-hand that being overwhelmed by pain can lead to depression and despair, even anger and aggression directed against our self or others. Such conditioned responses, while understandable, especially if one was hurt as a child and has not yet learned to respond compassionately to one's own suffering, must not be confused with compassion.

Compassion Practices

Here are some compassion practices to try out and experiment with. Remember, don't try to force things, and give the practices and yourself some time. It's not helpful to judge yourself or give up hope – but if judgments or hopeless thoughts and feelings arise, don't judge yourself for having them or lose hope!

Simply repeat, with a genuine intention, a few **phrases of kindness and compassion toward yourself**. Some commonly used phrases are, "May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be free of suffering."

Another option is, "May I have a calm, gentle, and loving mind." Or you can make up phrases of your own, experimenting until you find ones that work for you.

After a few minutes of repeating these phrases, and continually reconnecting with the intention behind saying them, you may find that feelings of kindness and love, a state of calm, and/or other nice things are happening in your mind and body. Doing this practice for 10 to 20 minutes once a day can be very powerful and can create a resource to draw on during particularly stressful times.

Offer compassion to your painful feelings. A common phrase to use is, "I care about my pain." Again, you may be surprised to discover the power of simply repeating a phrase like this with a sincere intention.

When difficult emotions arise, try holding them like you would a crying child. Hold the fear like you would hold a fearful child. Hold the anger as you would hold an angry child. Ultimately, it's about learning to meet each one of your thoughts and mind-body states with this unconditional love, like welcoming all your children home.

Offer compassion to the hurt part of yourself. Bring to mind an image of yourself at a time of hurt and pain and offer compassion to the child or adult you were then. You might use phrases like, "may you find peace, may you be free of suffering."

Tonglen Practice

Try a practice known as "tonglen," which involves **"sending and receiving" coordinated with breathing**. Picture a person at a time of pain and hurt. On the in-breath, breathe in that person's pain and suffering. On the outbreath send that person support and caring.

Finally, try **directing compassion to the quality of your own mind, or the part of you, that can be mean or cruel to yourself or others**. Recall a time that you were hurtful to yourself or someone else (start with a relatively mild case). Notice how you were responding based on past conditioning, feeling like you were defending and protecting yourself, or justly punishing yourself or the other person.

Offer compassion to that tendency to respond to pain or being wronged with anger and aggression. Offer compassion to yourself for how – like all human beings, especially those who have been deeply hurt – you can create more suffering because of your confusion and your limited ability to respond to pain compassionately.

These fundamental forms of human kindness, lovingkindness and compassion, are indeed essential companions to mindfulness. They will calm your mind and body. They will bring you peace, ease, and happiness. Like mindfulness, lovingkindness and compassion require practice and discipline, as well as patience with yourself. But the practice and patience are well worth it.

Gradually but inevitably, you will find yourself having kind, loving and compassionate responses to a greater and greater range of experiences – ultimately even the most difficult and painful ones.

Let's Take A Closer Look at the Brain

Dr Shanida Nataraja (The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation), describes the human brain as a reddish grey mass, with the consistency of firm jelly, which weighs on average the same as three bags of sugar and houses 100 billion individual brain cells called neurons. Each neuron has a cell body which houses its processor, the nucleus.

Branching from the bodies are numerous fingers like dendrites which branch and re-branch, fanning out to extensive, tree like structures that intertwine with dendritic trees of other neurons.

Each neuron makes up to 1000 different connections with its neighbours and different areas of the brain. This extensive connectivity allows electrical signals, and thus information to travel from one brain processing centre to another in a matter of milliseconds.

The human brain is organized in a hierarchical manner: the **oldest parts** controlling the **more primitive, instinctual behavioural reflexes**; the **newest parts** controlling the **more sophisticated cognitive, sensory and motor functions**.

The brain is made up of three main blocks: the forebrain, the midbrain and the hindbrain.

The oldest part of the human brain, the **hindbrain**, evolved more than 500 million years ago. It closely resembles the brain of a modern reptile, so is sometimes called "**the reptilian brain**". It contains the **amygdala, the brain's "panic button,"** that activates the "fight-flight" response and is responsible for automatic physiological reflexes that control breathing, heart rate and digestion, and coordinate movement and sense perception.

The **midbrain**, also called the "**mammalian brain**," contains the neurons responsible for temperature control and the fine tuning of movement. It relays sensory information from the body's sensory organs to the forebrain. It also forms an important part of the **limbic system**, a group of brain structures associated with the expression of emotion.

The most evolved part is the **forebrain** or "**human brain**", which is composed of cerebral hemispheres, and is what we most commonly think of as the brain, and the hypothalamus and thalamus. In the last 100,000 years, the weight of the human brain has tripled, and most of this growth has been in the cerebral hemispheres. The neurons of the forebrain control cognitive, sensory and motor function, as well as regulating reproductive functions, eating, sleeping and the display of emotion.

The Neuroscience of Emotions

Emotions are triggered in the brain by thoughts, which are often unconscious. When we are confronted by a **potential threat**, this can trigger fear, anger or the urge to flee (sometimes called "**amygdala hijack**"). The reaction is often disproportionate to the actual provocation.

When in the grip of these emotions, your **capacity for higher "rational brain" thinking is diminished**, and you are likely to revert to rote behaviours stored in the basal ganglia.

The practice of mindfulness helps us to **recognize and observe our thought patterns**. Practitioners develop the ability to recognize when thoughts arise, and observe them in a detached manner, without the need to become involved in them (thus not triggering an emotional or "automatic" reaction).

One of the enduring changes in the brain of those who routinely meditate, is that **the brain becomes thicker**. In other words, those who routinely meditate build synapses, synaptic networks, and layers of capillaries (the tiny blood vessels that bring metabolic supplies such as glucose or oxygen to busy regions), which an MRI shows is measurably thicker in two major regions of the brain.

One is in the **pre-frontal cortex**, located right behind the forehead. It's involved in the executive **control of attention** – of deliberately paying attention to something. This change makes sense because that's what you're doing when you meditate or engage in a contemplative activity.

The second brain area that gets bigger, is a very important part called the **insula**. The insula tracks both the **interior state of the body and the feelings of other people**, which is fundamental to **empathy**. So, people who routinely tune into their own bodies – through some kind of mindfulness practice – make their insula thicker, which helps them become more self-aware and empathic.

This is a good illustration of neuroplasticity, which is the idea that as the mind changes, the brain changes, or as Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb put it, neurons that fire together wire together."

Buddhism teaches that the mind takes the shape of whatever it rests upon; or, more exactly, **the brain takes the shape of whatever the mind rests upon**.

Because of its neuroplasticity, prolonged **meditative practice with happiness and compassion as its objects will breed evermore happiness and compassion**, and through this we may find the necessary escape from the Buddha's "three poisons." Meditative practice that trains the mind of the contemplative towards ever greater compassion and happiness, due to the brain's plasticity, therefore breeds a repetitive and positive cycle leading towards enlightenment, just as the Buddha taught 2,500 years ago.

Mindfulness Helps the Brain Communicate Better with Itself

A finding from the rapidly expanding field of Contemplative Neuroscience is that regular meditation seems to optimize the way the different **parts of the brain communicate and coordinate** with each other, thus ending the disconcerting feeling that there is more than one person in our heads.

The effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain is that there is a beefing up (in activation and even in size) of the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC). The mPFC is an area which neuroscientists believe plays in important role in **integrating our higher, "intellectual" brain areas (for example, your frontal cortex) with those down below in our more raw, "emotional" areas (like your primitive hindbrain and your limbic system).**

Having a more formidable mPFC allows your brain to bridge the gap, as it were, between your "thinking" and your "feeling" areas. Your brain **can better integrate what's going on in your "emotional" brain areas and your "intellectual" brain areas.**

Right Brain, Left Brain and Mindfulness

According to neuroscientist, Dr Shanida Nataraja, westerners use the left hemisphere of their brain too much.

For simplicity of explanation, the **left hemisphere** is associated with **analytical, rational and logical processing**, whereas the **right hemisphere** is associated with **abstract thought, non-verbal awareness, visual and spatial perception and the expression and modulation of emotions**. In the western world, most individuals navigate through their everyday life in a fashion dominated by left brain thinking. Missing out on right brain activity results in too much thinking going on: too much frantic doing, not enough time being.

Practicing mindfulness can bring about **calmness, stilling the brain chatter, and help us shift towards right brain mode.**

By engaging our right brain, we **activate the parasympathetic nervous system (as opposed to the adrenaline releasing sympathetic system).** More parasympathetic activity means **less stress** and therefore better health.

According to Neuroscientist Dr Shanida Nataraja's studies, those new to meditation practices such as mindfulness often put pressure on themselves to be successful and "get there" quickly - a left brain "are we there yet?" approach - and consequently take longer to benefit. Shanida suggests that the key is to **be kind to yourself**, acknowledging thought and letting go. This activates certain pathways in the brain which reduce left brain activity.

Attention Changes Brain Anatomy

Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin reports, “We all know that if you engage in certain kinds of exercise on a regular basis you can strengthen certain muscle groups in predictable ways. **Strengthening neural systems** is not fundamentally different. It’s basically replacing certain habits of mind with other habits.”

Michael Stanclift writes that the brain anatomy we inherit from our parents determines the original landscape upon which our brain's "empire" will be built. We inherit individual tendencies, these are like the weather patterns, and natural resources of an area - largely predetermined but can be nurtured or deteriorated by our habits. The **landscape-anatomy of our brain determines which skills we perform best**, and which habits become automatic, but there's a twist to this story.

Neuroscientists have discovered that **where we direct our attention**, not the environmental conditions alone, **determines which specific areas we develop** and redevelop. Our attention changes the anatomy; it is the land developer and construction crew all in one.

The developed landscape of our brain determines how it will function. This ability to change the landscape of our brains and ultimately augment how our minds will operate is called **neuroplasticity**. We are constantly, willingly, changing the structure of our most fascinating organ as we move our attention here and there. At any moment we can be commanding areas to be restructured and modify the direction of our "empire."

All mental exercises will have this effect, and the areas they influence depends on the skills we are using. This certainly adds a level of complexity to the whole "nature or nurture" question of how our personalities and talents are shaped.

We've also discovered that once a skill can be done without attention, our brains stop shaping those areas. Our brain figures that part of our "empire" is working just fine, puts that area on **autopilot**, and directs its resources elsewhere. Walking is a great example: after we've learned to walk well, we can practically ignore that we're doing it, and the complex movements don't change much. We don't walk better, even though we constantly practice. We all trip and roll our ankles from time to time, but unless we have a severe injury our brains stick with what worked in the past.

Mindfulness and Neuroplasticity

“So, what does neuroplasticity have to do with meditation?" I'm glad you asked! It is useful to develop our concentration through meditation, focusing and refocusing our attention. Through meditation we learn to engage areas of our brains that are otherwise rarely used in our day to day life. Though each technique will have unique effects, all meditations have the common theme of gradually **quieting our minds and allowing us to feel a connection to the present moment**.

By using our attention during a mindful meditation, we are **training our brain** to become more and more connected to the current moment. This has the effect of allowing ourselves to **see what's actually happening**, without getting caught in our opinion of the situation.

In the current moment we disengage from the pull of memories, fantasies and worries and this is likely why many forms of meditation can help alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Mindfulness meditation works on similar brain centres as those affected by anti-depressants. So, if you are considering sitting for a meditation and wondering "What the hell am I doing this for anyway?" remember that you're **changing the structures of your brain**. Your improvements to these areas, though laborious, will provide your "empire" with prosperity for years to come.

Mindfulness meditation differs from other forms by promoting concentration on current, physical sensations instead of letting the mind roam free. Recent studies suggest mindfulness meditation works the brain the way **a good workout regimen** works the body - minus the buckets of sweat, of course. But rather than building muscle, M.R.I. scans show this form of meditation **increases the brain's grey matter in regions closely associated with memory, learning, and emotional regulation**. Studies also suggest mindfulness meditation **reduces brain activity in areas responsible for anxiety, stress, and perceptions of pain**.

Mindfulness meditators' brains have also demonstrated an enhanced ability to suppress distractions, allowing the brain to better interpret, categorize, and respond to a variety of stimuli. After focusing on otherwise ignored actions like breathing, meditators' brains are primed to **be extra perceptive in everyday life**. Definitely a useful advantage in an over-stimulating, strobe light-friendly world.

Mindfulness and Brain Wave Frequency Changes

Antoine Lutz and colleagues report that all meditators exhibit atypically **large amounts of synchronized gamma activity**. Gamma wave synchrony may play a significant role in binding the disparate information conveyed by the central nervous system into coherent perception. In other words, attentional training with compassionate embrace as its focus seems to **develop the brain's capacity for unifying sensory information into coherent patterns of perception that support both personal and interpersonal connection**.

Such a sense of connection can be vital in the treatment of disorders like severe depression and schizophrenia, both of which involve a profound interior experience of isolation. Data suggest that attentional training can induce both temporal and stable changes in neural firing patterns. Attentional training using techniques like the loving kindness meditation, which seem to systematically drive and **educate the brain toward producing more gamma wave activity**, may offer a new set of developmental tools with which to treat schizophrenia.

Austin postulates, within the same context, to link the simultaneous activation of the caudate and putamen, in addition to the long-distance **gamma synchrony between the frontal and parietal lobes**, with the formation of "habits at successively higher-level behavioural and cognitive levels". Taken together, these data could point to meditative training as a means of highly unifying sensory information to the point of **producing unitary-that is, harmonious-interpersonal perceptions and relations**.

The **temporal changes** evoked during meditative practice, such as the **high occurrence of alpha and theta wave activity**, are stably integrated into the brain's neural circuitry when practiced consistently over time. Such alpha and theta wave activity is believed to be indicative of states of **inner calm and stability**.

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