

# HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT EMOTIONS



DR SUSAN KRIEGLER

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## 1. RELAXATION

### An Elixir for Body, Mind and Spirit

Relaxation is perhaps the single most important key to physical health and emotional well-being. It is the antidote to stress which is known to contribute to the development of disease. When we relax, our body has an opportunity to unwind. The benefits of relaxation have been well researched and some of these are summarized below:

- Gives the heart a rest by slowing the heart rate
- Reduces blood pressure
- Slows the rate of breathing, which calms the brain and the nervous system
- Increases blood flow to the muscles
- Decreases muscle tension
- More energy and better sleep
- Enhanced immunity
- Increased concentration
- Better problem-solving abilities
- Greater efficiency
- Smoother emotions - less anger, crying, anxiety, frustration
- Less headaches and pain

I encourage you to make relaxation a priority! Relaxation is allowing physical and/or mental tension to be released. Tension is the body's natural response to threat, part of the body's alarm or survival mechanism. It can be a very useful response, but a lot of the time, we don't need this tension, so it's okay to learn to let it go, and learn some relaxation skills. Healthy living is a matter of balance. Relaxation is part of the balancing process alongside other aspects of your lifestyle such as what you eat, your physical activity and how you handle stress. Learning to relax takes practice, as with learning any new skill.

It's a great help to learn a relaxation technique, to help us unwind and bring our tensions and anxiety under control. There are several books, leaflets or audio recordings which we can use ourselves. It's a good idea to practice regularly so we can be more prepared for the more stressful times.

## How Relaxation Helps

- **Reduces tiredness** – if you can manage everyday life without excessive tension
- **Improves performance** – your performance in work, sport or music can be raised through self-awareness and control of tension
- **Reduces pain** – pain can occur as a result of tension e.g., headaches and backache. Relaxation can help you to cope by raising your pain threshold and reducing the amount of pain
- **Coping with stress** – relaxation helps you to reduce the effects of stress and to breathe effectively
- **Improves sleep** – by allowing you to be calm and peaceful
- **Improves self-confidence** – by increasing your self-awareness and ability to cope with daily life
- **Improves personal relationships** – it is easier to relate well to other people when you are relaxed and self-confident

## Relaxation and Stress

When we feel anxious or stressed, it's our body's natural response to feeling threatened, the alarm system which helps us deal with danger: our breathing rate increases, as does our blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, state of mental arousal and adrenaline flow. A lot of the time, we don't need those survival responses, so relaxation helps to decrease that adrenaline response, to let it go.

## Breathing and Relaxation

Our out-breath releases tension in the chest muscles and allows all muscles to release their tension more easily. Breathing is far more effective when we use our diaphragms rather than with the chest muscles. Sit comfortably in a chair and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen (hand on navel). Take two or three fairly large breaths – which hand moves first, and which moves most?

Practice so that it is the lower hand on your abdomen that moves rather than the one on your chest. People often think that their tummy goes in when they breathe in - but the reverse should be the case.

When you're feeling tense or hoping to relax, try breathing out a little bit more slowly and more deeply, noticing a short pause before the in-breath takes over (don't exaggerate the in-breath, just let it happen). You might find it useful to count slowly or prolong a word such as "one" or "peace" to help elongate the out-breath a little (to yourself or out loud).

### Simple Breathing Exercise

We'll start with a simple breathing exercise which can be done in a few seconds, no matter where you are. It is particularly helpful at stressful times, but it's also useful to do it at regular intervals throughout the day.

Take a deep, slow breath in and hold it for 5 seconds. Feel your abdomen expand as you do this.

Breathe out slowly, to a count of 5. Breathe in again, make every breath slow and steady and exactly the same as the one before it and the one after it. As you breathe out, concentrate on expelling ALL the air in your lungs. If you're alone, you could make a noise like "who" as you do this to help you feel the air being let out. Keep the out-breath going for as long as you can. Keep it relaxed for a few seconds before you inhale again.

## 2. MINDFULNESS

### A New Approach to Old Demons

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which is very relevant for life today. Mindfulness is a very simple concept. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non - judgmentally. This increases awareness, clarity and acceptance of our present-moment reality.

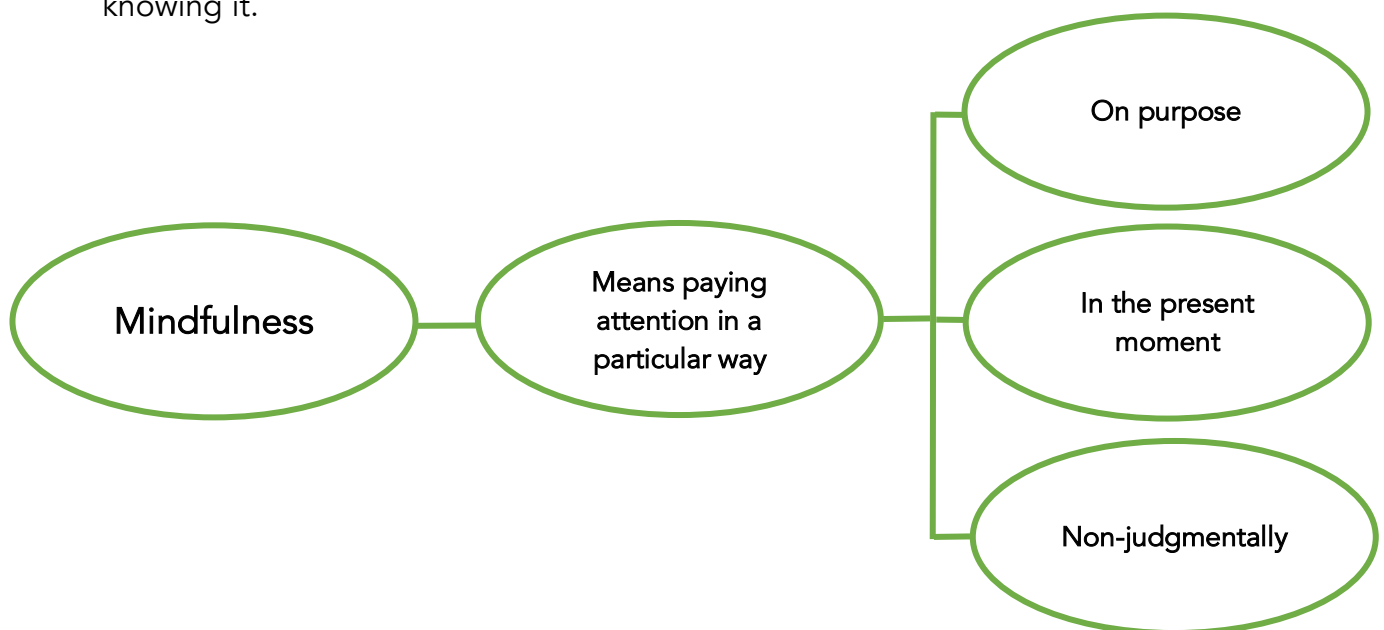
Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or tradition, religious, cultural or scientific. It is simply a practical way to notice thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - anything we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds normally behave, it takes a lot of practice.

I might go out into the garden and as I look around, I think "that grass really needs cutting, and that vegetable patch looks very untidy". My young daughter on the other hand, will call over excitedly, "Mummy - come and look at this ant!" Mindfulness can simply be noticing what we don't normally notice, because our heads are too busy in the future or in the past - thinking about what we need to do or going over what we have done.

Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.

### Automatic Pilot

In a car, we can sometimes drive for miles on "automatic pilot", without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really "present", moment-by-moment, for much of our lives: We can often be "miles away" without knowing it.



On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our "buttons pressed": Events around us and thoughts, feelings and sensations in the mind (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead to worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go into the same old "mental ruts" that may have caused problems in the past.

## Emotional Pain

Some issues you might be confronting:

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Unable to form lasting or healthy relationships
- Anxiety, phobias, nightmares
- Childhood trauma
- Depression

## Mindfulness is A Way to Embrace Pain and Reduce Suffering, Restoring Harmony and Balance

Embracing pain is the antidote to suffering. This is counterintuitive. Instinctively, human beings react to pain by moving "away." We create buffers between ourselves and the experiences that cause discomfort.

The truth is, healing only occurs when we move authentically toward that which is hurting us, experiencing the truth of the pain, and learning to integrate this truth into our lives in a new way.

Once you stop protecting yourself, the loss, the abuse, the trauma – whatever the source of your pain is - becomes part of the fabric of your being. Because the pain is no longer separate from you, you are no longer compelled to react.

There is no such thing as pain in the past. If you have pain, no matter how long ago the experience, nor how deep, the result is a present pain. Either you are feeling pain now or are suppressing it and acting out.

Let's say you were abused in some way as a child. Abuse is often committed by someone not all that different from yourself. That is why it is not uncommon to conclude, however mistakenly, that you are the reason for the abuse. This creates a terrible conflict within you, which results in suffering. Avoiding the pain only creates more patterns of avoidance, which show up in every aspect of your life. But if you go toward the pain and experience the breadth and depth of your discomfort, you shift your relationship to your reality. Pain does not go away. But it will not cause you to suffer anymore. Your door will open to presence, authenticity, harmony and balance.

## What Is Harmony and Balance?

When you feel ordinary, when you have a sense of simple awareness, when you feel the need to be neither more nor less than who you are, when life appears to be coming from a state of grace, when anything is possible - then balance and harmony are fluctuating back and forth according to life's flow. This is how we are designed; this is the way life is really meant to be.

Some signs of unresolved anger:

- Depression
- Hostility
- Reactivity
- Obsessive need to please
- Low self-esteem
- Feeling the need to control, or feeling everything out of control
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Loss of interest in sex

Additional signs of fear:

- Need to protect oneself
- Backache, neck ache
- Bodily discomfort
- Social discomfort

## Shedding Light on the Darkness Within

Anger, fear and sadness are common feelings. We all have them from time to time. We get distressed over them because we make judgements about them.

However, when we allow these feelings to come through life naturally and easily, they pass quickly, and we come back into harmony and balance. We feel more peaceful and creative.

Long-lasting anger, fear and sadness all tend to have their cause in hurt. The denial of hurt creates reactivity. In the case of anger, that reactivity is often in the form of blame. But blaming someone only causes more anger to rebound back at us - thus feeding our own anger.

People hold onto self-defeating feelings because they don't want to face the hurt, which is completely understandable. Sometimes it takes a long time to root out the disappointment, pain, and hidden fears that lie beneath behaviours that are holding you back.

However, if you are curious and interested in what's going on inside you and are willing to make the courageous decision to actually take a peek, you will overcome the cycle of anger, fear or sadness in which you feel entangled.

### 3. MINDFUL ACTIVITY

#### Being Present in the Moment

When I wash the dishes each evening, I tend to be "in my head" as I'm doing it, thinking about what I have to do, what I've done earlier in the day, worrying about future events, or regretful thoughts about the past. Again, my young daughter comes along. "Listen to those bubbles Mummy. They're fun!" She reminds me often to be more mindful. Washing up is becoming a routine (practice of) mindful activity for me. I notice the temperature of the water and how it feels on my skin, the texture of the bubbles on my skin, and yes, I can hear the bubbles as they softly pop continually. The sounds of the water as I take out and put dishes into the water. The smoothness of the plates, and the texture of the sponge. Just noticing what I might not normally notice.

A mindful walk brings new pleasures. Walking is something most of us do at some time during the day. We can practice, even if only for a couple of minutes at a time, mindful walking. Rather than be "in our heads", we can look around and notice what we see, hear, sense. We might notice the sensations in our own body just through the act of walking. Noticing the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Noticing our breathing. Thoughts will continuously intrude, but we can just notice them, and then bring our attention back to our walking.

The more we practice, perhaps the more, initially at least, we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that's ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to continually bring our attention back to the activity, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.



## 4. MINDFUL BREATHING

### Creating Calm, Non-Judging Awareness

The primary focus in Mindfulness Meditation is the breathing. However, the primary goal is a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. This creates calmness and acceptance.

1. Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
2. Direct your attention to your breathing.
3. When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply accept them, giving them the space to come and go without judging or getting involved with them.
4. When you notice that your attention has drifted off and becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

It's ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

### Allowing Thoughts and Feelings to Come and Go

The primary goal of mindful breathing is simply a calm, non- judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them.

- Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Imagine that you have a balloon in your tummy. Every time you breathe in, the balloon inflates. Each time you breathe out, the balloon deflates. Notice the sensations in your abdomen as the balloon inflates and deflates. Your abdomen rising with the in-breath and falling with the out-breath.
- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the human mind does. Simply notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Likewise, you can notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, and again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.

- You don't have to follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts to be there. Just notice those thoughts, and let them drift on by, bringing your attention back to your breathing.
- Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

It's okay and natural for thoughts to enter into your awareness, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

### Breathing Meditation 1 (Kabat-Zinn)

Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, keep the spine straight and let your shoulders drop.

Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.

Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in-breath and fall or recede on the out-breath.

Keep your focus on the breathing, "being with" each inbreath for its full duration and with each out-breath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.

Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.

If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your "job" is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.

Practice this exercise for fifteen minutes at a convenient time every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice into your life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to do anything.

## Breathing Meditation 2 (Kabat-Zinn)

Tune into your breathing at different times during the day, feeling the belly go through one or two risings and fallings.

Become aware of your thoughts and feelings at these moments, just observing them without judging them or yourself.

At the same time, be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling about yourself.

Using mindfulness to cope with negative experiences (thoughts, feelings, events).

As we become more practiced at using mindfulness for breathing, body sensations and routine daily activities, so we can then learn to be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, to become observers, and subsequently more accepting. This results in less distressing feelings and increases our level of functioning and ability to enjoy our lives.

## 5. MINDFULNESS OF EMOTIONS

### Ending the Struggle

We often start to learn mindfulness skills by focusing our attention on our breath, our bodies, the environment or activities. Being mindful of emotions helps us to stand back from the emotion, understand it, not to fear it or struggle against it, and it can have the added benefit of reducing the distress (although the aim is to learn to accept the experience, rather than lessen the distress).

Set aside a few minutes when you can be quiet and won't be disturbed.

Start by bringing your attention to your breath. Notice your breathing as you slowly breathe in and out, perhaps imagining you have a balloon in your belly, noticing the sensations in your belly as the balloon inflates on the in-breath, and deflates on the out-breath.

Notice the feelings, and what it feels like. Name the emotion:

- What word best describes what you are feeling?
- Angry, sad, anxious, irritated, scared, frustrated.... Accept the emotion. It's a normal body reaction. It can be helpful to understand how it came about – what it was, the set of circumstances that contributed to you feeling this way. Don't condone or judge the emotion. Simply let it move through you without resisting it, struggling against it, or encouraging it. Investigate the emotion.
- How intensely do you feel it?
- How are you breathing?
- What are you feeling in your body? Where do you feel it?
- What's your posture like when you feel this emotion?
- Where do you notice muscle tension?
- What's your facial expression? What does your face feel like?
- Is anything changing? (nature, position, intensity)

What thoughts or judgements do you notice? Just notice those thoughts. Allow them to come into your mind and allow them to pass. Any time you find that you're engaging with the thoughts – judging them or yourself for having them, believing them, struggling against them, just notice, and bring your attention back to your breathing, and to the physical sensations of the emotion.

If any other emotions come up, if anything changes, simply notice and repeat the steps above. Just notice that the feelings change over time. As you become more practiced, you can use this mindfulness technique when you feel more intense emotion.

### A Wider Perspective

With mindfulness, even the most disturbing sensations, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, can be viewed from a wider perspective as passing events in the mind, rather than as "us", or as necessarily true. By simply being present in this way, you support your own deep healing (Brantley 2003).

When we are more practiced in using mindfulness, we can use it even in times of intense distress, by becoming mindful of the actual experience as an objective observer, using mindful breathing and concentrating attention on breathing with the body's experience, listening to the distressing thoughts mindfully, recognizing them as merely thoughts, breathing with them, allowing them to happen without believing them or arguing with them.

If thoughts are too strong or loud, then we can move attention to our breath, the body, or to sounds in the environment. We can use kindness and compassion for ourselves and for the elements of the body and mind's experience. "May I be filled with peace and ease. May I be safe" (Brantley 2003).

Jon Kabat-Zinn uses the example of waves to help explain mindfulness. Think of your mind as the surface of a lake or an ocean. There are always waves on the water, sometimes big, sometimes small, sometimes almost imperceptible. The water's waves are churned up by winds, which come and go and vary in direction and intensity, just as do the winds of stress and change in our lives, which stir up waves in our mind.

It's possible to find shelter from much of the wind that agitates the mind. Whatever we might do to prevent them, the winds of life and of the mind will blow, do what we may.

**"You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf" (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).**

## 6. MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

### Developing Awareness

#### Mindfulness of Thoughts - The Visitor

This exercise helps to develop a mindful awareness of the environment, of the body, of the breath, and of thoughts and emotions. You can practice the exercise as a whole, or in parts – using any part of the exercise.

#### The Environment

As you're walking, or just sitting quietly somewhere, start to notice things as though you were a visitor to this place. As you look around you, notice sights, sounds and smells as though you had never seen, heard or smelled them before. You can imagine you are a visitor from another area or culture, or from a different species, even an alien visitor. Seeing or hearing things for the first time, from a completely different perspective. Spend a little time just looking and listening and noticing.

#### The Body

When 'Dr Who' regenerates into his new body, he immediately checks out his new body. As a newcomer, new awareness or a visitor, start to imagine being in your body for the first time. Notice what that feels like – what bodily sensations do you notice?

How does it feel to move around, stretching those muscles, standing up or sitting down? What do those hands feel like as you move them about, stretching and wiggling those fingers, clenching those fists? As you start to walk, how is that? What do you notice about your legs – upper legs, feet and toes?

Move your head around and notice what your neck, and shoulders feel like. Bend, stretch and move about. What are those physical sensations? Spend a little time just noticing those bodily sensations and imagine taking your body for its first ever walk, or any everyday activity.

### The Breath

What would you, as a new awareness or visitor to this new body, notice about the sensations of breathing, as you breathe in, then out? Notice the sensations in the abdomen, the chest, the throat, the mouth and nose. You can notice how your attention wanders, as thoughts come in, sometimes crowding in, and your attention can follow those thoughts.

Just notice as your attention wanders, then gently bring your focus back to your breath. Minds do wander, thoughts will come, and thoughts will go, that is the nature of the human mind. As a visitor, you can stand back, notice those thoughts, feelings, sounds and sensations, and keep bringing your attention back to your breath.

### Thoughts and Emotions

Then you can start to notice, as a visitor, the thoughts and images, feelings and emotions that come and go, in this your new body and mind. You're brand new to this body and mind, and there are no expectations for you to react to any thought, image or emotion – you can just notice them, and not respond.

As a visitor, you can notice that they are just words and images, sensations, and feelings. Merely notice them as you would as an alien visitor to this body and mind. Words and images, sensations and feelings: they come, and they go, and that's okay, because that's just what the human mind does.

### Leaves in the Stream

When learning mindfulness skills, it is usually recommended that we start practicing mindfulness of the breath, then mindfulness of the body, before moving onto mindfulness of thoughts.

The Leaves in the Stream metaphor is often used as an exercise to help us distance ourselves from our almost constant stream of thoughts. To stand back and observe our thoughts rather than get caught up in them. We can notice that thoughts are simply thoughts, passing streams of words that we don't need to react to, we can just notice them.

Whilst sitting quietly, bring your focus to your breath, then start to notice the thoughts that come into your mind. As you notice each thought, imagine putting those words onto a leaf as it floats by on a stream. Put each thought that you notice onto a leaf, and watch it drift on by. There's no need to look for the thoughts, or to remain alert waiting for them to come. Just let them come, and as they do, place them onto a leaf.

Your attention will wander, particularly so at first, and that's okay - it's what our mind does. As soon as you notice your mind wandering, just gently bring your focus back to the thoughts, and placing them onto the leaves.

After a few minutes, bring your attention back to your breath for a moment, then (open your eyes and) become more aware of your environment.

### Clouds in the Sky

Some prefer using clouds in the sky rather than leaves in the stream for mindfulness of thoughts. When you notice a thought come into your mind, just put the thought on a cloud as it drifts across the sky or dissipates.

### Diffusion Techniques

Diffusion involves distancing, disconnecting or seeing thoughts and feelings for what they are (streams of words, passing sensations), not what they say they are (dangers or facts).

**STOP, STEP BACK, OBSERVE** (the thoughts and feelings, what's happening to/for the other person).

**Notice what's happening** – your thoughts, physical sensations, emotions, images, memories. Notice the way you're interpreting what they mean, and how that's affecting you.

**Notice the unhelpful thoughts.** It can help to say them differently, in a non-threatening way: slowly, in a squeaky or comic voice or write them down.

Identify the emotion you're feeling and label the unhelpful thoughts.

- An evaluation
- A prediction
- A feeling or sensation
- A memory
- An unhelpful thinking habit: mind-reading (assuming we know what others are thinking), negative filter (only noticing the bad stuff), emotional reasoning (I feel bad so it must be bad), catastrophizing (imagining the worst), the internal critic, etc.

## 7. MORE MINDFULNESS METAPHORS

### Alternative Ways of Looking at Things

Therapy metaphors use a story or illustration to see alternative ways of looking at something. Every culture and religion use these types of stories, analogies, parables to improve understanding, make a point more memorable, and help us make positive changes.

The example metaphors here are to help us see thoughts – their nature and role - in a different light. Just that alone, seeing thoughts differently, helps to create a space, a distance, between us and our thoughts, which helps us to stand back a little, see things a bit more objectively, and make wiser and more helpful decisions about how to react effectively.

#### The River

Sometimes it feels like we're being carried away downstream, struggling to stay afloat amongst all the mud, filth and debris. That muck and debris are thoughts, sensations, events, feelings, and that river is our distress as we drift helplessly downstream.

But we can stand on the riverbank, watching as those thoughts, events, sensations, feelings go by. You might watch individual items as they pass – perhaps a thought floating on a leaf, a sensation as a log, event as on old bicycle. We can stand and watch.



### Passengers on the Bus

You can be in the driving seat, whilst all the passengers (thoughts) are being critical, abusive, intrusive, distracting, and shouting directions, or sometimes just plain nonsense. You can allow those passengers to shout and chatter noisily, whilst keeping your attention focused on the road ahead, heading towards your goal or value.

### Playground Bully

Our minds are like school playgrounds that are surrounded by secure high fences – they keep children in, and others out. Any bullies in that playground mean that the other children can't escape for long. This particular bully uses verbal abuse, shouting, teasing, and threats (rather than physical violence). The children are all fenced in together, and ideally, they have just got to learn to accept and learn to be with each other. So, neither can we escape our thoughts, we cannot stop them, but perhaps we can learn to live with them by seeing them differently. Along comes bully and takes on 3 potential 'victims' who all react differently.

- Victim 1 – believes the bully, distressed, reacts automatically (bully carries on).
- Victim 2 – challenges the bully "hey I'm not stupid, I got 8 out of 10 in my spelling test this morning, you only got 4" (bully eventually gives up).
- Victim 3 – looks at the bully (acknowledges the thought), then walks away and goes off to play football with his mates (dismisses the thought), then changes their focus of attention.

### Thought Train

We can sit on the train, watching the scenery (thoughts, images, sensations) go by, or stand on the platform watching the thought train pass by – we don't have to jump on it.

### The Beach Ball

We try to stop thoughts, but that's impossible. It's like trying to constantly hold an enormous inflatable beach ball under the water, but it keeps popping up in front of our faces. We can allow the ball to float around us, just letting it be. So rather than stop the thoughts, we can stop fighting them, and let them be, without reacting to them.

### Tunnel

When we get anxious driving through a tunnel, the best option is to keep going rather than try to escape. This feeling will pass – there is an end to this tunnel.

### The Mountain

Whatever the weather, or whatever happens on the surface of the mountain – the mountain stands firm, strong, grounded, permanent. We can be like that mountain, observing thoughts, feelings, sensations, knowing inner stillness.

## The Mind Monsters (Bad Wolf, Good Wolf)

We can think of unhelpful or distressing thoughts as the Mind Monsters. (The Native American Cherokees use a similar example of a "Bad Wolf, Good Wolf"). Being a monster, we can't do much to stop or fight them – that just seems futile sometimes. When we do fight, it can help for a while, but those monsters may well just keep coming back. Like all monsters though, these Mind Monsters need food. If we can deprive them of food, then they'll eventually go off seeking sustenance elsewhere. These monsters (or 'Bad Wolf') feed off our reactions – our believing those monsters, reacting to them, being upset by them, and acting accordingly and often automatically and unthinkingly.

We can maintain and make worse our situations just by those reactions. Those vicious cycles of our reactions mean that the monsters just keep coming. If we can stop 'feeding' the monsters – they'll get weaker and weaker and eventually move away. Others will come, but again we can choose not to feed them – by changing the way we think and react, and by paying more attention to the 'Good Wolf' in us.

## Google Earth or The Helicopter View

Sometimes it's useful to see the bigger picture. When something is distressing us, we're so close to it, involved with it, part of it – it's really hard to stand back from what's happening. It's a bit like Google Earth – we see the closeup view but everything else is hidden from us. "We can't see the wood for the trees". We can zoom out our perspective and see the bigger picture. Some might describe it as like having a helicopter view – as the helicopter takes off, getting higher and higher, it sees a bigger picture, and is less involved with the detail at ground level.

## Foreground and Background – Monitors and Zoom Lenses

When doing presentations using a laptop and projector, there's an option of what to display on each monitor. The laptop screen is called Monitor 1, and the projector is Monitor 2. The graphic in Control Panel is shown as 2 large screens with large white numbers on them. Click on Monitor 1 and it enlarges and comes into the foreground, whilst Monitor 2 gets smaller and further away. Click on Monitor 2 and it zooms up towards you, getting bigger, whilst Monitor 1 goes away.

It can be like that with our attention. Something grabs our attention – a sound, a sight, a feeling, a thought – and we zoom in, putting it the foreground of our attention, making it bigger and more intrusive. Everything else moves away into the background.

We can choose what we put in the foreground – more helpful thoughts, our breath, imagery, a sensation, what we see, what we hear – so that other more unhelpful thoughts or sensations go mistier into the background. Like a zoom lens as it focuses in on something particular, the rest of the picture goes out of focus, loses clarity. We can zoom in and out, shifting our focus of attention.

### The Plane Crash

Not so long ago, a plane landed seemingly miraculously on the River Hudson. All 155 people came out alive. What did those 155 people feel as they stood on dry land and realized what they'd been through? Would they all have had the same reaction? Absolutely not! Many would have felt very distressed and upset – they nearly died, and they might decide never to fly again as it's clearly too dangerous. Others might be overwhelming relief and happiness at having survived. Some might decide to live life to the full as a result of their experience and be determined to fly even more. There could be 155 different reactions. Same event, different responses.

It's not the event which causes our emotions, it's the meaning we give them. Those who interpreted the event as terrifyingly dangerous may feel very distressed and be too anxious to fly again. Others will feel ecstatic as the meaning they gave the event was that they were incredibly lucky to survive.

### The Traffic Accident

When there's a traffic accident, police ask for witnesses to come forward and describe what happened. They like to have as many witness statements as possible so that they can build up enough evidence to give them a broader, more realistic version of events. In a traffic accident, there will be many different perspectives on what happened. The driver of one car will have one view, another driver or a passenger will have yet another view. Each onlooker who witnessed the accident will have a slightly different perspective, depending on where they were, how far they were, how good a view they had, what else was going on, how much danger they felt they were in, how the accident affected them, what the accident means to them.

It's the same principle with everything - each situation, event, conversation, means something different to all those involved, and also to those not involved.

### The Quicksand

Used by Stephen Hayes to introduce clients to Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT). When we're stuck in quicksand, the immediate impulse is to struggle and fight to get out.

But that's exactly what you mustn't do in quicksand – because as you put weight down on one part of your body (your foot), it goes deeper. So, the more you struggle, the deeper you sink – and the more you struggle. Very much a no-win situation. With quicksand, there's only one option for survival. Spread the weight of your body over a large surface area – lay down. It goes against all our instincts to lay down and really be with the quicksand, but that's exactly what we have to do. So, it is with distress. We struggle and fight against it, but we've perhaps never considered just letting it be, and being with the distressing thoughts and feelings, but if we did, we'd find that we get through it and survive – more effectively than if we'd fought and struggled.

### The Poisoned Parrot

Imagine you're given a parrot. This parrot is just a parrot - it doesn't have any knowledge, wisdom or insight. It's bird-brained after all. It recites things 'parrot fashion' – without any understanding or comprehension. It's a parrot.

However, this particular parrot is a poisoned and poisonous parrot. It's been specifically trained to be unhelpful to you, continuously commenting on you and your life, in a way that constantly puts you down, criticizing you.

For example, the bus gets stuck in a traffic jam, and you arrive at work 5 minutes late. The parrot sits there saying: "There you go again. Late. You just can't manage to get there on time can you. So stupid. If you'd left the house and got the earlier bus, you'd have arrived with loads of time to spare and the boss would be happy. But you? No way. Just can't do it. Useless. Waste of space. Absolutely pathetic!"

How long would you put up with this abuse before throwing a towel over the cage, or getting rid of the parrot?

Yet we can often put up with the thoughts from this internal bully for far too long. Decades. We hear that 'parrot', believe the 'parrot', and naturally get upset. That then affects the way we live our lives – the way we behave towards others, how we are, what we think about others, what we think about the world, and how we think and feel about ourselves.

We can learn to use the antidote: just notice that parrot and cover the cage! "There's that parrot again. I don't have to listen to it – it's just a parrot". Then go and do something else. Put your focus of attention on something other than that parrot. This parrot is poison though, and it won't give up easily, so you'll need to keep using that antidote and be persistent in your practice!

Eventually it will get tired of the towel, tired of you not responding. You'll notice it less and less. It might just give up its poison as your antidote overcomes it, or perhaps fly off to wherever poisoned parrots go.

## 8. 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."

### 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 out-breath 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.

## 9. CHRISTIAN MINDFULNESS

### Let God's Love Shine Through You

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 Blessings 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."

**Psalms 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."

## 10. NEUROPLASTICITY Taking the Brain to the Gym

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 a reason 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. If only we'd known about this back in Calculus class....

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 overstimulating, strobe light-friendly world.

### Mindfulness and Structural Brain Changes

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, and 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 eudemonic well-being, defined by Siegle 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.



*Susan Kriegler*  
Ph.D(Psig.) D.Ed.

181 Beckett Street  
Arcadia  
Pretoria  
0083

+27(0)60 621 5398  
reception.smk@yebo.co.za  
www.susankriegler.com  
www.Facebook.com/DrSusanKriegler

Dr Susan Kriegler is a highly renowned psychologist from Pretoria, South Africa. She consults from her practice as well as online to clients in more than 7 countries. To schedule an appointment, or for more reading material as well as Audio & Video downloads, please visit [www.susankriegler.com](http://www.susankriegler.com).

*Artwork by Vladimir Kush*

