

## Session 3 – Practicing Mindfulness

### Objectives

- In this session, we will learn to:
  - Warm up meditative awareness with affection and appreciation.
  - Bring mindful awareness to present-moment experience.
  - Understand how resistance causes suffering.
  - Understand backdraft and how to deal with it using mindfulness techniques.
  - Calm the mind by anchoring attention on a single object.
  - Explore the meaning of mindfulness and self-compassion.

### Before the Session

#### Wandering Mind

*"To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work." ~ Mary Oliver*

Mind wandering is normal. The mind wanders much of our lives, according to a 2010 article in Science magazine. Researchers, Killingsworth & Gilbert (2010), developed an iPhone app that contacted 2,250 volunteers at random intervals and asked if they were paying attention to what they were doing. The results of this study showed that on average, participants' minds wandered 46.9% of the time.

Why does the mind wander so much? Brain researchers have identified an interconnected network of brain regions that is active when the mind is at rest and inactive when the mind is engaged in a task—the default mode network (Raichle, 2001). The default mode network includes structures located right down the midline of the brain from front to back. Those parts become highly active when we're disengaged and the mind is wandering.

The default mode network is engaged when, for example, you're taking a shower and you realize your mind has been wandering and you have no idea if you added shampoo or conditioner or both to your hair. We forget to pay attention to the present moment and we lose track of time.

The default mode network does three basic things:

- 1.create a sense of self,
- 2.project that self into the past or the future, and
- 3.look for problems.

Our default mode network is designed to help us learn from past problems and predict future problems. Generally speaking, we are hardwired for survival, not for happiness. Research shows that mindfulness meditation deactivates the default mode network, both while meditating (Brewer, et al., 2011) and in a resting state (Taylor et al, 2012).

A Brief Introduction to the Default Mode Network:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A-RqZzd2JU&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A-RqZzd2JU&feature=emb_logo)

## **What is it like to be mindful?**

- To be present for each moment of life as it unfolds? Let's try it!
- There are two videos you can watch below. "Moments" is a video that you might watch if you're feeling open to emotional experience and you don't mind watching something that might activate and/or energize you. "Time lapse dancing flower" is a video you might watch if you need more of a stabilizing, soothing experience. Please be your own best teacher in deciding which video to watch.
- See if you can allow yourself to be with your experience as you watch this video, including the experience of opening and closing as needed. What did you feel as you watched the film? Please feel free to share your experiences on the Discussion Board.
- The experience of mindfulness is much more than simple awareness. When mindfulness is in full bloom, it's warm and tender. Our lives can appear very beautiful, impermanent, and poignant.

## Liz Notes

Resistance – is resistance = to shooting the second arrow?

## **What Is Backdraft?**

Backdraft refers to discomfort that may arise when we give ourselves compassion. The experience of backdraft can be confusing for some practitioners but it is a key part of the transformation process. It helps to understand the nature of backdraft and to know how to respond to it.

"Backdraft" is a term that firefighters use to describe how a fire can grow when fresh air is introduced through an open door. A similar effect can occur when we open the door of our hearts with self-compassion. Most of our hearts are hot with pain accumulated over a lifetime. In order to function in our lives, we needed to shut out stressful or painful experiences. However, when the door of our hearts opens and kindness flows in, old hurts are likely to come out. That's backdraft. The discomfort we feel is not created by self-compassion practice—it's simply being re-experienced and transformed by the power of compassion. There is another metaphor for this process – warming up ice-cold hands. When our hands are numb from being out in cold and then they begin to warm up, we may experience pain for a short time. Numbness is also what we may feel toward old pains in our lives until we warm up our awareness with self-compassion.

## How Do We Recognize Backdraft?

Backdraft can show up as any type of emotional, mental, or physical uneasiness. For example:

- Emotionally – shame, grief, fear, sadness
- Mentally – "I'm all alone." "I'm a failure." "I'm unworthy."
- Physically – body memories, aches, pains

Often uneasiness appears out of nowhere and we may not understand why it's happening. A tear can appear while meditating, or a sadness, or a sense of vulnerability. Secondary reactions may also arise when we struggle not to feel backdraft. For example, we might go into our heads (intellectualize), become agitated, withdraw, space-out, or criticize ourselves and others. All these reactions are quite natural and can also be met with kindness and compassion.

## What Can We Do About Backdraft?

Below is a summary of approaches to backdraft that you will learn in MSC. However, please remember that you are the foremost expert on your life and what you need. You can begin by asking yourself "What do I need right now? "What do I need to feel safe?" Then, depending on what feels right to you, you may consider any of the following strategies:

Practice mindfulness to regulate attention:

- Label the experience as backdraft – “Oh, this is ‘backdraft’”—as you might for a dear friend.
- Name your strongest emotion and validate it for yourself in a compassionate voice (“Ah, that’s grief”).
- Explore where the emotion physically resides in your body, perhaps as tension in your stomach or hollowness in your heart, and offer yourself soothing or supportive touch.
- Redirect your attention to a neutral focus inside your body (e.g., the breath), or a sensation at the boundary of the body (e.g., sensations in the soles of your feet while walking), or a sense object in the outside world (e.g., ambient sounds). The further from your body you go, the easier it will be.
- Anchor awareness in ordinary activities:
  - You may feel the need to anchor your awareness in an everyday activity, such as washing the dishes, going for a walk, showering, cycling. If you happen to find the activity pleasant or rewarding for your senses (smell, taste, touch, sound, vision), allow yourself to savour it. Please see the handout, “Mindfulness in Daily Life,” for further instructions.
  - Or you may feel the need to comfort, soothe or support yourself in a practical, behavioral way, such as by having a cup of tea, a warm bath, listening to music, or calling a friend. Please see the section, “Self-Compassion in Daily Life,” for additional instructions.
  - If you need further assistance, please make use of your personal contacts (friends, family, therapists, teachers) to get what you need.

## ***Mindfulness and Self-Compassion***

Mindfulness has four important roles in MSC:

1. Knowing that we’re suffering while we’re suffering. We cannot have a compassionate response if we don’t know we’re suffering
2. Anchoring and stabilizing awareness in present-moment experience when a person is emotionally overwhelmed. Compassion training is warming and mindfulness training is calming, or cooling.
3. Managing difficult emotions by finding them in the body and relating to them with spacious, affectionate awareness. It can be easier to connect with the felt sense of difficult emotions in the body rather than with fleeting thoughts.
4. Balancing compassion with equanimity, or calm, spacious awareness. We need a stable mind to choose compassionate action.

## **How do mindfulness and self-compassion relate to one another?**

Self-compassion is the heart of mindfulness. It is the emotional attitude of mindfulness when we meet suffering. Without self-compassion, we cannot tolerate difficult emotions.

And we need mindfulness to be self-compassionate. "Space creates warmth and warmth creates space." Together, mindfulness and self-compassion are a powerful formula for alleviating suffering.

In our modern understanding:

- Mindfulness focuses primarily on acceptance of experience. Self-compassion focuses on caring for the experiencer.
- Mindfulness asks, "What am I experiencing right now?" Self-compassion asks, "What do I need right now?"
- Mindfulness says, "Feel your suffering with spacious awareness." Self-compassion says, "Be kind to yourself when you suffer."

Both mindfulness and self-compassion allow us to live with less resistance to ourselves and our lives. Self-compassion is allowing our hearts to melt in the heat of suffering – letting go of resistance - not pushing suffering away.

The central paradox of self-compassion is, "When we struggle, we give ourselves compassion not to feel better but because we feel bad." A metaphor is a child with the flu. We are naturally kind to a child with the flu, not to make the flu go away but simply because the child is sick. Can we offer ourselves the same kindness when we feel bad?

We need mindfulness to ensure that self-compassion isn't used as a hidden form of resistance, and we need self-compassion to feel safe enough to mindfully open to difficult experiences. Together they form a beautiful dance.

Both mindfulness and self-compassion meditation are intentional practices—the intention of mindfulness is to accept present moment experience and the intention of self-compassion is to warm up our awareness, especially toward ourselves—both as vehicles to reduce suffering. In spite of adding the additional element of kindness, compassion is not more effortful than mindfulness.

Some mindfulness practitioners worry that self-compassion will strengthen the sense of a rigid, separate "self" and thereby increase our suffering. However, both mindfulness and self-compassion reduce and soften the sense of self. Mindfulness dismantles the self into moment-to-moment experience. Compassion melts the sense of separate self by generating warmth and connection.

## **Home Practice**

If you want to, you can work toward practicing 30 min/day of formal and informal practice combined. Practice tips:

- Make it pleasant
- Make it easy
- Start small – even 3 minutes per day will train your mind in mindfulness
- If you have an established practice, see if you can add a touch of loving-kindness or compassion to what you’re already doing
- Affectionate Breathing (you can find this on the Insight Timer app, and also below)
- **Soles of the Feet** - adapted from Singh et al, 2003
  - This is an effective way to anchor your awareness in the present moment, in body sensation, especially when you’re upset and can’t calm yourself down.
  - Stand up and feel the soles of your feet on the floor. Rock forward and back a little, and side to side. Make little circles with your knees, feeling the changes of sensation in the soles of your feet.
  - When you notice your mind has wandered, just feeling the soles of your feet again.
  - If you wish, you can begin to walk slowly, noticing the changing sensations in the soles of your feet. Noticing the sensation of lifting a foot, stepping forward, and the placing the foot on the floor. Doing the same with both feet as you walk.
  - As you walk, perhaps also noticing for a moment how small the surface area of your feet is, and how hard your feet work to keep your body off the ground. See if you can notice that with appreciation or gratitude.
  - When you are ready, returning to standing

## **Informal Practice**

- Mindfulness can be practiced every moment of the day—while you brush your teeth, while you walk from the parking garage to work, when you eat your breakfast, or whenever your cell phone rings. Here's an informal practice to cultivate your mindfulness in daily life:
- Pick an ordinary activity. You might choose drinking your cup of coffee in the morning, brushing your teeth, or taking a shower. If you wish, select an activity that occurs early in the day before your attention is pulled in many directions.
- Choose one sensory experience to explore in the activity, such as the sensation of taste as you drink your coffee or the sensation of water touching your body while showering.

- Immerse yourself in the experience, savoring it to the fullest. Return your mind to the sensations again and again when you notice it has wandered away.
- Bring gentle, friendly awareness to the activity until it has been completed.

Feel free to share on the discussion board your experience of this informal practice.

### **Informal Practice: Self-Compassion in Daily Life**

You already know how to be self-compassionate. You would not have lived this long if you couldn't care for yourself. Self-care in the midst of difficulty is self-compassion— a kindly response to suffering. Anyone can learn self-compassion.

Self-compassion is much more than training the mind. Behavioral self-compassion is a safe and effective way of practicing self-compassion. It anchors self-compassion practice in ordinary activities of daily life.

Below are some pathways to self-compassion. You can identify for yourself which behavioral self-compassion practices already work for you, and you can cultivate an intention to bring these informal practices in when you need them in daily life:

- Physically - exercise, massage, warm bath, cup of tea
- Mentally - meditate, watch a funny movie, read an inspiring book
- Emotionally – have a good cry, pet the dog, listen to music
- Relationally - meet with friends, send a birthday card, play a game
- Spiritually - pray, walk in the woods, help others

Please use this handout to write down ways that you take care of yourself behaviorally. You can refer back to this document whenever you are trying to work out how to give yourself compassion.

## **SELF-COMPASSION IN DAILY LIFE**

The goal of the MSC program is to be mindful and self-compassionate in daily life. That means to (1) know when you're under stress or suffering (mindfulness) and (2) to respond with care and kindness (self-compassion). The simplest approach is to discover how you already care for yourself, and then remind yourself to do those things when your life becomes difficult.

### **Self-Compassion in Daily Life**

#### **PHYSICALLY** – soften the body

How do you care for yourself physically (e.g., exercise, massage, warm bath, cup of tea)? Can you think of new ways to release the tension and stress that builds up in your body?

#### **MENTALLY** – reduce agitation

How do you care for your mind, especially when you're under stress (e.g., meditation, watch a funny movie, read an inspiring book)? Is there a new strategy you'd like to try to let your thoughts come and go more easily?

#### **EMOTIONALLY** – soothe and comfort yourself

How do you care for yourself emotionally (pet the dog, journal, cook)? Is there something new you'd like to try?

#### **RELATIONALLY** – connect with others

How or when do you relate to others that brings you genuine happiness (e.g., meet with friends, send a birthday card, play a game)? Is there any way that you'd like to enrich these connections?

#### **SPIRITUALLY** – commit to your values

What do you do to care for yourself spiritually (pray, walk in the woods, help others)? If you've been neglecting your spiritual side, is there anything you'd like to remember to do?

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## **Get Grounded With a “Here-and-Now Stone”: Learn To Use a Small, Physical Object To Ground Yourself - <https://mindfulmethodsforlife.com/get-grounded/>**

When life's whirlwind starts up, it's nice to have something to grab hold of that reminds you to stay in your body, stay present and feel your feet on the ground. For me, the simplicity of a stone works wonders towards this end.

I call it my “here-and-now stone.”

Find a stone in your yard, on a riverbank, at the beach, in the forest, or even at a craft or garden store. Choose the stone that calls to you most if you have a wide assortment to choose from. Once you've selected your stone, spend some time with it. Really look at it and feel it.

Notice its range of colors and textures. Observe how it changes temperature the longer you hold it. Rub your fingers over it and move it around in your hand. Think about how you are holding something that is millions — maybe even billions — of years old.

While you're focusing on the stone, guess what you're NOT focusing on?

The “here-and-now stone” invites you to be fully present in the moment, not thinking about the past or future. You get to focus on a stone, not on the drama of any particular storyline going on in your life. By focusing on the stone, you are giving your brain a much-needed break from all the chaos.

Use your here-and-now stone every day

I have a “here-and-now stone” on a cord so I can wear it around my neck. I reach up throughout the day and rub it between my fingers. It's nice to have your stone somewhere where you can easily reach it. I keep another one in the front pocket of my purse. I know some others who carry it in their pants pocket and keep it on a shelf in their closet at night so they can remember to grab it when they get dressed in the morning.

Whatever way works best for you, try carrying a “here-and-now stone” with you every day for a month. Notice how it gives you the opportunity to step back from life's chaos and get grounded, even if just for a moment. Give yourself that little gift and see how it helps diffuse some of life's more challenging moments.

**What Works for Me:** The MSC program contains a wide variety of meditations and informal practices that can be used to strengthen the habit of responding mindfully and compassionately to emotional distress. As we go through the program, you might like to use this handout to check the practices that appeal to you the most.

### Core Meditations

- Affectionate Breathing
- Loving-Kindness for Ourselves
- Giving and Receiving Compassion

### Other Meditations

- Loving-Kindness for a Loved One
- Compassionate Body Scan
- Compassionate Friend
- Compassion for Self and Others

### Informal Practices

- Self-Compassion Break
- Soothing Touch
- Self-Compassion in Daily Life
- Here-and-Now Stone
- Soles of the Feet
- Mindfulness in Daily Life
- Finding Loving-Kindness Phrases
- Compassionate Letter to Myself
- Sense and Savor Walk
- Savoring Food
- Compassionate Walking
- Compassionate Movement
- Living with A Vow
- Compassionate Listening
- Working with Difficult Emotions
- Compassion with Equanimity

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## **"Unconditional" by Jennifer Welwood**

Willing to experience aloneness,  
I discover connection everywhere;  
  
Turning to face my fear,  
I meet the warrior who lives within;  
Opening to my loss,  
I gain the embrace of the universe;  
Surrendering into emptiness,  
I find fullness without end.  
  
Each condition I flee from pursues me,  
Each condition I welcome transforms me  
And becomes itself transformed  
Into its radiant jewel-like essence.

## **"The Constant Lover" by John Astin**

Awareness  
her gaze is so constant,  
our every move  
watched  
with such affection,  
a ceaseless vigil  
without condition  
or agenda,  
silent,  
patient,  
unrelenting in her  
embrace.

There is endless room in  
the heart of this lover,

infinite space for whatever  
foolishness we may  
toss her way.  
But she is also  
crafty, this one –  
a thief who will steal away  
everything we ever cherished,  
all our beliefs,  
all our ideas,  
all our philosophies,  
until nothing is left  
but her shimmering  
wakefulness,  
this simple love  
for what is.

## **"My Balm" by Jane O'Shea**

I close my eyes and sigh, and here I am lying in the hammock in my heart. Moving gently, with the soft air of my breath.

When I fall from my head past my words, I'm caught lovingly by the hammock of my heart and rocked to its rhythmic beat.

It is my peace, my rest, my quiet, cradled in the hammock of my heart. It is constant; it is safe to be held in the hammock of my heart. No place to go. Nothing to do. Nobody to please. It is my altar, my blessing, my balm, here in the hammock of my heart.

## **Practice Partners**

This week you are offered the opportunity to form small groups to meet (via Skype, Zoom, phone, or in person) to discuss your practice. This is an optional part of the program, but from previous experience, we've found that talking with other participants between sessions can be a lovely way to connect on a deeper level with the group.

If you would like to be put in a practice group with 3-4 others in our group, please email [caroline@acompassionateheart.co.uk](mailto:caroline@acompassionateheart.co.uk). If there are particular people you would like to be in a group with, please let me know and I'll do my best to partner you up with the people you want to discuss your practice with. Once we've set up the groups, you can work out a time between yourselves that works for you on a regular basis, and you can decide how often to meet.

## **Optional Extras**

Marcus Raichle on the 'default mode network'

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZgOUAtwUA8&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZgOUAtwUA8&feature=emb_logo)

Kristin Neff on Mindfulness

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sidiDUg\\_\\_Dg&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sidiDUg__Dg&feature=emb_logo)

Kristin Neff on Mindfulness and Self-Compassion - Here is a video that helps us expand on our understanding of "mindfulness."

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqQHhF4CaKQ&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqQHhF4CaKQ&feature=emb_logo)

## **Reading to support Session 3**

Mindful Self-compassion workbook, Kristen Neff & Chris Germer, chapters 6, 7, 8

The Mindful Path to Self-compassion, Chris Germer, chapter 2

## **Reading to support Session 2**

Self-compassion, Kristin Neff, chapter 5

## **Doing something is better than doing nothing for most people, study shows**

[https://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2014-07/uov-dsi063014.php](https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2014-07/uov-dsi063014.php)

7/24/2014 - Fariss Samarrai [fls4f@virginia.edu](mailto:fls4f@virginia.edu), University of Virginia

Doing something is better than doing nothing for most people, study shows Most people are just not comfortable in their own heads, according to a new psychological investigation led by the University of Virginia.

The investigation found that most would rather be doing something – possibly even hurting themselves – than doing nothing or sitting alone with their thoughts, said the researchers, whose findings will be published July 4 in the journal *Science*.

In a series of 11 studies, U.Va. psychologist Timothy Wilson and colleagues at U.Va. and Harvard University found that study participants from a range of ages generally did not enjoy spending even brief periods of time alone in a room with nothing to do but think, ponder or daydream. The participants, by and large, enjoyed much more doing external activities such as listening to music or using a smartphone. Some even preferred to give themselves mild electric shocks than to think.

"Those of us who enjoy some down time to just think likely find the results of this study surprising – I certainly do – but our study participants consistently demonstrated that they would rather have something to do than to have nothing other than their thoughts for even a fairly brief period of time," Wilson said.

The period of time that Wilson and his colleagues asked participants to be alone with their thoughts ranged from six to 15 minutes. Many of the first studies involved college student participants, most of whom reported that this "thinking period" wasn't very enjoyable and that it was hard to concentrate. So Wilson conducted another study with participants from a broad selection of backgrounds, ranging in age from 18 to 77, and found essentially the same results.

"That was surprising – that even older people did not show any particular fondness for being alone thinking," Wilson said.

He does not necessarily attribute this to the fast pace of modern society, or the prevalence of readily available electronic devices, such as smartphones. Instead, he thinks the devices might be a response to people's desire to always have something to do.

In his paper, Wilson notes that broad surveys have shown that people generally prefer not to disengage from the world, and, when they do, they do not particularly enjoy it. Based on these surveys, Americans spent their time watching television, socializing or reading, and actually spent little or no time "relaxing or thinking."

During several of Wilson's experiments, participants were asked to sit alone in an unadorned room at a laboratory with no cell phone, reading materials or writing implements, and to spend six to 15 minutes – depending on the study – entertaining themselves with their thoughts. Afterward, they answered questions about how much they enjoyed the experience and if they had difficulty concentrating, among other questions.

Most reported they found it difficult to concentrate and that their minds wandered, though nothing was competing for their attention. On average the participants did not enjoy the experience. A similar result was found in further studies when the participants were allowed to spend time alone with their thoughts in their homes.

"We found that about a third admitted that they had 'cheated' at home by engaging in some activity, such as listening to music or using a cell phone, or leaving their chair," Wilson said. "And they didn't enjoy this experience any more at home than at the lab."

An additional experiment randomly assigned participants to spend time with their thoughts or the same amount of time doing an external activity, such as reading or listening to music, but not to communicate with others. Those who did the external activities reported that they enjoyed themselves much more than those asked to just think, that they found it easier to concentrate and that their minds wandered less.

The researchers took their studies further. Because most people prefer having something to do rather than just thinking, they then asked, "Would they rather do an unpleasant activity than no activity at all?"

The results show that many would. Participants were given the same circumstances as most of the previous studies, with the added option of also administering a mild electric shock to themselves by pressing a button.

Twelve of 18 men in the study gave themselves at least one electric shock during the study's 15 minute "thinking" period. By comparison, six of 24 females shocked themselves. All of these participants had received a sample of the shock and reported that they would pay to avoid being shocked again.

"What is striking," the investigators write, "is that simply being alone with their own thoughts for 15 minutes was apparently so aversive that it drove many participants to selfadminister an electric shock that they had earlier said they would pay to avoid."

Wilson and his team note that men tend to seek "sensations" more than women, which may explain why 67 percent of men selfadministered shocks to the 25 percent of women who did.

Wilson said that he and his colleagues are still working on the exact reasons why people find it difficult to be alone with their own thoughts. Everyone enjoys daydreaming or fantasizing at times, he said, but these kinds of thinking may be most enjoyable when they happen spontaneously, and are more difficult to do on command.

"The mind is designed to engage with the world," he said. "Even when we are by ourselves, our focus usually is on the outside world. And without training in meditation or thought-control techniques, which still are difficult, most people would prefer to engage in external activities."

## **Wandering Mind Not a Happy Mind**

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/11/wandering-mind-not-a-happy-mind/>

About 47% of waking hours spent thinking about what isn't going on

People spend 46.9 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're doing, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy. So says a study that used an iPhone Web app to gather 250,000 data points on subjects' thoughts, feelings, and actions as they went about their lives.

The research, by psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert of Harvard University, is described this week in the journal *Science*.

"A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind," Killingsworth and Gilbert write. "The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost."

Unlike other animals, humans spend a lot of time thinking about what isn't going on around them: contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future, or may never happen at all. Indeed, mind-wandering appears to be the human brain's default mode of operation.

To track this behavior, Killingsworth developed an iPhone app that contacted 2,250 volunteers at random intervals to ask how happy they were, what they were currently doing, and whether they were thinking about their current activity or about something else that was pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant.

Subjects could choose from 22 general activities, such as walking, eating, shopping, and watching television. On average, respondents reported that their minds were wandering 46.9 percent of time, and no less than 30 percent of the time during every activity except making love.

"Mind-wandering appears ubiquitous across all activities," says Killingsworth, a doctoral student in psychology at Harvard. "This study shows that our mental lives are pervaded, to a remarkable degree, by the nonpresent."

Killingsworth and Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, found that people were happiest when making love, exercising, or engaging in conversation. They were least happy when resting, working, or using a home computer.

"Mind-wandering is an excellent predictor of people's happiness," Killingsworth says. "In fact, how often our minds leave the present and where they tend to go is a better predictor of our happiness than the activities in which we are engaged."

The researchers estimated that only 4.6 percent of a person's happiness in a given moment was attributable to the specific activity he or she was doing, whereas a person's mind-wandering status accounted for about 10.8 percent of his or her happiness.

Time-lag analyses conducted by the researchers suggested that their subjects' mind-wandering was generally the cause, not the consequence, of their unhappiness.

"Many philosophical and religious traditions teach that happiness is to be found by living in the moment, and practitioners are trained to resist mind wandering and to 'be here now,'" Killingsworth and Gilbert note in *Science*. "These traditions suggest that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind."

This new research, the authors say, suggests that these traditions are right.

Killingsworth and Gilbert's 2,250 subjects in this study ranged in age from 18 to 88, representing a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and occupations. Seventy-four percent of study participants were American.

More than 5,000 people are now using the iPhone Web app.

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Neff, K. D., & Dahm, K. A. (in press). Self-Compassion: What it is, what it does, and how it relates to mindfulness. To appear in M. Robinson, B. Meier & B. Ostafin (Eds.) *Mindfulness and Self-Regulation*. New York: Springer. (40 pages)

[https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/Mindfulness\\_and\\_SC\\_chapter\\_in\\_press.pdf](https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/Mindfulness_and_SC_chapter_in_press.pdf)

## Think Less Think Better (NYT Opinion by Moshe Bar, 6/17/2016)

[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/opinion/sunday/think-less-think-better.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/opinion/sunday/think-less-think-better.html?_r=1)

A FRIEND of mine has a bad habit of narrating his experiences as they are taking place. I tease him for being a bystander in his own life. To be fair, we all fail to experience life to the fullest. Typically, our minds are too occupied with thoughts to allow complete immersion even in what is right in front of us.

Sometimes, this is O.K. I am happy not to remember passing a long stretch of my daily commute because my mind has wandered and my morning drive can be done on autopilot. But I do not want to disappear from too much of life. Too often we eat meals without tasting them, look at something beautiful without seeing it. An entire exchange with my daughter (please forgive me) can take place without my being there at all.

Recently, I discovered how much we overlook, not just about the world, but also about the full potential of our inner life, when our mind is cluttered. In [a study published in this month's Psychological Science](#), the graduate student Shira Baror and I demonstrate that the capacity for original and creative thinking is markedly stymied by stray thoughts, obsessive ruminations and other forms of "mental load." Many psychologists assume that the mind, left to its own devices, is inclined to follow a well-worn path of familiar associations. But our findings suggest that innovative thinking, not routine ideation, is our default cognitive mode when our minds are clear.

In a series of experiments, we gave participants a free-association task while simultaneously taxing their mental capacity to different degrees. In one experiment, for example, we asked half the participants to keep in mind a string of seven digits, and the other half to remember just two digits. While the participants maintained these strings in working memory, they were given a word (e.g., shoe) and asked to respond as quickly as possible with the first word that came to mind (e.g., sock).

We found that a high mental load consistently diminished the originality and creativity of the response: Participants with seven digits to recall resorted to the most statistically common responses (e.g., white/black), whereas participants with two digits gave less typical, more varied pairings (e.g., white/cloud).

In another experiment, we found that longer response times were correlated with less diverse responses, ruling out the possibility that participants with low mental loads simply took more time to generate an interesting response. Rather, it seems that with a high mental load, you need more time to generate even a conventional thought. These experiments suggest that the mind's natural tendency is to explore and to favor novelty, but when occupied it looks for the most familiar and inevitably least interesting solution.

In general, there is a tension in our brains between exploration and exploitation. When we are exploratory, we attend to things with a wide scope, curious and desiring to learn. Other times, we rely on, or "exploit," what we already know, leaning on our expectations, trusting the comfort of a predictable environment. We tend to be more exploratory when traveling to a new country, whereas we are more inclined toward exploitation when returning home after a hard day at work.

Much of our lives are spent somewhere between those extremes. There are functional benefits to both modes: If we were not exploratory, we would never have ventured out of the caves; if we did not exploit the certainty of the familiar, we would have taken too many risks and gone extinct. But there needs to be a healthy balance. Our study suggests that your internal exploration is too often diminished by an overly occupied mind, much as is the case with your experience of your external environment.

In everyday life, you may find yourself “loading” your mind in various ways: memorizing a list of groceries to buy later at the supermarket, rehearsing the name of someone you just met so you don’t forget it, practicing your pitch before entering an important meeting. There are also, of course, the ever-present wanderings of a normal mind. And there are more pathological, or at least more chronic, sources of mental load, such as the ruminative thought patterns characteristic of stress, anxiety and depression. All these loads can consume mental capacity, leading to dull thought and anhedonia — a flattened ability to experience pleasure.

My birthday gift to myself for the last couple of years has been a week of silence at a vipassana meditation retreat. Being silent for a week, and trying to empty your mind of thought, is not for the faint of heart, but I do wish that everyone could try it at least once. During my first retreat, I wondered how a simple tomato could taste so good, why I did not mind physical discomfort as much, how looking at a single flower for 45 minutes was even possible, let alone so gratifying. My thoughts — when I returned to the act of thinking about something rather than nothing — were fresher and more surprising.

It is clear to me that this ancient meditative practice helps free the mind to have richer experiences of the present. Except when you are flying an F-16 aircraft or experiencing extreme fear or having an orgasm, your life leaves too much room for your mind to wander. As a result, only a small fraction of your mental capacity remains engaged in what is before it, and mind-wandering and ruminations become a tax on the quality of your life. Honing an ability to unburden the load on your mind, be it through meditation or some other practice, can bring with it a wonderfully magnified experience of the world — and, as our study suggests, of your own mind.

Moshe Bar, a neuroscientist, is the director of the Multidisciplinary Brain Research Center at Bar-Ilan University and a professor at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital.

## Mindfulness at the Gym by Kristy Arbon

I don't listen to music at the gym. Somehow, it feels like sensory overload. Surrounded by sights and sounds, feeling sensations in my body, being with pain – how can I engage my ears as well in this cacophony of stimuli?

It wasn't always this way. I used to love listening to music that revved me up, that helped to get my adrenaline going. What changed? Mindfulness. I turned my gym experience into an opportunity to practice.

Mindfulness allows us to attend to each thing that happens in our experience, one by one. We practice mindfulness by slowing everything down and either:

- anchoring on just one object like the breath, returning to our anchor when we notice our mind has wandered; or
- simply being aware of all stimuli in our experience, reminding ourselves to return to this open awareness when we find that our mind has wandered into memories or future projections.

There's no scarcity of fodder for mindfulness at the gym. Here's an excerpt from my last 30 minute cardio stint:

"Should I check my email?" Ah, a thought about distracting myself. It's nicer not engaging with work stuff. I can just be with the simplicity of what's going on here.

"Will my arms get sore in this position?" Ah, a fear about pain. Let's just pay attention to sensations in the arms and change position if need be. No need to plan just yet.

"Is that that infernal stair-master making all that racket? They should do something about that. It's so annoying." Ah, feeling annoyed. It's not making my experience here any nicer. I could just let that go and I'll feel calmer. There's nothing to be done about the stair-master.

"15 minutes to go? Ah, this is getting painful. I don't like it!" Ah, resistance. That's not going to make it any easier to be with the next 15 minutes. Just be with this pedal rotation ... and this one ... and this one ...

Plenty to do at the gym! And I can work out as well.

I have come to appreciate my workout "quiet time" – nothing to plan or attend to. For a real "flow" experience, I do some crossfit – there's no internal dialogue then, just all hard work and determination. It's partly why us humans like to exert ourselves. It turns that inner chatter off and pumps some awesome natural chemicals into our system!

So if you don't have time to meditate, see if you can find time to be with some other experience in your day. Maybe one during which you ordinarily distract yourself (riding the subway, driving to work, walking the dog). These can be precious times for ....

Ahhh, quiet.

Founder of HeartWorks, creatrix of Somatic Self-Compassion and developer of Live Online Mindful Self-Compassion for the Center for Mindful SelfCompassion, Kristy Arbon is an Australian living and loving in the US. After discovering the deep healing power of emergent self-wisdom and selfcompassion in her own life, Kristy felt called to share these practices and trainings with others. She's since made it her life's work. "I teach so that I can learn, and I learn so that I can teach."

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**Starting a New Chapter with Backdraft By Kristy Arbon** - This article describes the experience of backdraft at a Mindful Self-Compassion course.

I worked at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies for five years. Each year that I was there, a fellow called Chris Germer came and taught a program called Mindful Self-Compassion in our Dharma Hall. Every year I saw this program coming up on our schedule, and thought, hmmmm, sounds interesting. It would have taken me 20 seconds to walk from my office to the Dharma Hall to attend this course, and I could have attended it on work time, but for four years, I managed to prioritize the endless task of taking care of emails rather than attending Chris's Mindful Self-Compassion course.

A combination of my A-type personality, obsessiveness and perfectionism, and an increasing number of changes at the study center, left me, by the fifth year, a bit of a mess. I was finally desperate enough to go to Chris's course.

So, as a manager at the center, I sat at the back of the Dharma Hall where escape would be easy and I could safely return to the comfort and familiarity of my emails. I was aware of my status as representative of the study center, which meant when I started to have some real emotions, things got sort of uncomfortable.

First, I got angry. Angry at Chris. He was talking about bringing kindness to our experience, warming up our conversation with ourselves, dropping the struggle. All I heard was a teacher setting me up to fail. I couldn't do these things. Who was he to expect me to drop my defenses and start treating myself differently? I wouldn't be able to do it, and I was angry about the contrast between what he was asking us to do and my abilities. I hate to fail.

I was also confused. Why was I having this strong emotion? I knew Chris and I liked him, and I understood him to be a gentle soul. Why was I getting so angry at this person? And why couldn't I drop the fight, just do what he asked? What on earth was going on in my experience?

And then, after some time struggling with confusion and anger, a dam in my heart burst open and I began to cry. Still confused, trying to not be too obvious about my unprofessional tears in the back of the Dharma Hall, I sat and sobbed silently ... for the whole weekend.

I sobbed as I realized how unkind people had been to me and how unkind I had been to myself. I sobbed because it felt so tender to open up to the experience of kindness. I sobbed in grief over a lifetime of believing that my needs were not important, that my emotions were not valid, that I was not tough enough, that I was somehow defective. I sobbed because I knew in my heart that I was discovering a missing piece in my life – self-compassion.

I was experiencing backdraft – a term we talk about in MSC that can be a surprising and powerful response to experiencing compassion in a real, embodied way, maybe for the first time.

Backdraft is the visceral somatic awareness of the contrast between how we have been treated – by ourselves and others – and how we need to be treated to thrive and flourish. Backdraft is grief and anger over a personal history of consistently unmet needs, all the while having some sense that we deserved something better, and finally, suddenly discovering experientially that we were right all along. We were worthy all along; we just had no-one there to make the transaction for our inalienable right to belong.

Kristin Neff suggests that backdraft might occur because a person's sense of self has been so invested in feeling inadequate this 'worthless self' fights for survival when it's threatened. This notion fits in well with Internal Family Systems theory, where our internal psychological system is viewed as a

group of parts, like a family. When one member of the family starts to do something different, it can cause a backlash from another part who was relying on maintaining the status quo for its existence, however maladaptive and neurotic that part might be. Our human systems are designed to survive, not be happy.

Paul Gilbert says that the attachment system (the development of our ability to bond with our caregivers) can act like a book, closing down at a particular time in a person's life due to abuse or neglect. Experiencing compassion can open the book at the same place, causing someone to re-experience emotional distress from childhood.

Love reveals anything unlike itself. (Anonymous)

Backdraft, for many people, is a necessary part of the healing process. Only after we can let our bodies and minds have their experiences in response to our hurts, in whatever form that takes, can we then move on to the work of tending to our unmet needs. Holding backdraft is a compassion practice.

As for me, my experience of backdraft led me to a multitude of life changes, all in the service of giving myself what I need to thrive and flourish. Backdraft was the start of a new chapter.

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## **Permission to Not Sleep by Kristy Arbon**

I love to sleep. I especially love being gradually less aware as I am moving toward sleep. As melatonin seeps into my system and my brain waves dial toward the theta rhythm, I enjoy a feeling that is like no other. I love to sleep.

It's the attachment to this pleasurable experience that used to make me anxious about sleep. What if I don't get enough sleep and I can't perform at my best tomorrow? What if I fail and have to face the judgment of others? Anxiety over failing and losing connection with others pervaded my night time ritual. The prospect of facing the next day mentally unprepared terrorized me.

Then I started practicing mindful self-compassion. And I started experimenting with embarking on a day, here and there, without the benefit of a good night's sleep. When I started doing a lot of travel for my work, I also started experimenting with jet lag and being prepared to let go of needing to know what timezone my body thought it was inhabiting.

My friend who frequents Buddhist monasteries in the UK, when asked what it's like to make the pilgrimage to these centers of Dharma once a year, answers, "I get to be with coldness and lack of sleep." The nuns and monks are encouraged to loosen their attachment to physical warmth or sleep: it's part of their practice.

If I can let go of my dependence on the illusion of safety that comes with being fully awake and at the top of my game with each new day, something else unfolds. It has to. Feeling groggy and nauseous, knowing that my brain is swimming in the slow lane, I become acutely aware that I do not have control, that I must simply be with my experience. And the only way to be with my experience that does not create a sense of unease about being unprepared is to be kind to myself; to be self-compassionate.

First I bring mindfulness: "Oh, there's grogginess and nausea." Then I bring selfcompassion: "My dear, it's OK to feel groggy and nauseous. There's where you're at right now, and that's where you should be. There's no other way it should be right now." And I use the opportunity to expect less of myself. I use the opportunity to let myself off the hook: "Of course you're struggling to function. No need to push. It will be OK." To help, I often share how I'm feeling with others around me. And we have a laugh about the shared human experience of the sleep-deprived.

As I give myself permission to be sleep-deprived, ironically, the ease I allow myself to go about the day with lends itself to a degree of focus and poise. The effort to just stay on track, without the burden of anxiety and expectations, moves me into a rather mindful way of being. It's no wonder those nuns and monks seem so serene – they're being with the experience of sleeplessness: mindfully, kindly.

Mindfulness and self-compassion aren't only useful when I'm sleep-deprived; they're useful when I'm in the grip of insomnia. When I find myself sleepless in the middle of the night, I know how unproductive it is to be angry with my experience. The angrier I am, the less likely I am to fall asleep. The more charged my emotions, the more cortisol and adrenaline courses through my system, guaranteeing wakefulness. Melatonin doesn't stand a chance in that environment.

Using mindfulness and self-compassion tools, instead of resisting my experience, I acknowledge my disappointment and any fear of facing the new day unprepared. I acknowledge my sleeplessness, resist looking for ways to blame myself for being in that predicament and I take care of myself in my discomfort. Just like a mother taking care of her child who is sick with the flu, knowing that her caregiving will not make the flu go away, I take care of myself knowing that I might still not sleep. Sometimes sleep comes easily after that, and sometimes it does not, but at least I am soothing myself

with oxytocin and opiates rather than jump starting myself with cortisol and adrenaline. If I can't sleep, at least I can get closer to some kind of restful state, which will offer something of the rejuvenation of actual sleep. I can give myself permission to not sleep.

Mindfulness and self-compassion: as Kristin Neff once said, "It's the new black; it goes with everything!"

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