

**Session 5 – Working with Difficulty**  
**Workbook and notes are combined this week as working with difficulty takes understanding and practice.**

**1. Practise awareness of breath, body, sounds and thoughts “sitting” meditation daily** (remember you can lie down)

<https://soundcloud.com/fiona-mckechnie108681984/sitting-practice-25-mins/s-DgF59SMNVHe>

- Try alternate days without a recording. Maybe use a timer such as <https://insighttimer.com/>
- Reflect on your practice by writing a few notes after each session

**2. Three Stage Pause**

Practise the regular Three Stage Pause three times a day, at times that you have decided in advance.

<https://soundcloud.com/fiona-mckechnie108681984/3-minute-pause/s-T9yMnZ8Cq2d>

**3. Pause to cope**

Practise the three stage pause when you notice unpleasant experiences. Pay particular attention to any thoughts which arise when you do this. If unhelpful thoughts are still around after the practice then try writing them down. You could use the recording below to guide your practice or try the pause without guidance, noticing how you are and tapping gently into what you need.

<https://soundcloud.com/fiona-mckechnie108681984/managing-challenging-times/s-kee8k2snCWQ>

The aim of this practice is to be with our experience rather than trying to get rid of it.

What happens when we stop adding an extra layer of effort to make things go?

***Staying curious and kind.***

## The Guest House

This being human is a guest-house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

Coleman Barks with John Moyne:  
*The Essential Rumi.*  
Harper, San Francisco.

### Why “be with” rather than avoid?

Avoidance or suppression may sound like a great idea if it means that we do not have to experience unwanted sensations or feelings. However there are various problems with this strategy for managing difficult experiences.

For understandable reasons humans frequently may try to suppress the feelings, squash them down, or ignore them. We may try to keep busy to distract ourselves from difficulties. We may use substances such as drugs, food, alcohol or nicotine to block out the feelings. We can try to dissociate from ourselves so as not to feel the sensations. Sometimes we have had experiences growing up that contributed to this avoidance, such as having caregivers who found it difficult to meet our needs if we did try to express our feelings.

Disadvantages of avoidance / suppression include the following:

- There is a lot of evidence that it does not generally work
- In fact it often has the counterproductive and paradoxical effect of leading to increased intensity and frequency of these feelings. This can make feelings seem more unpleasant, overwhelming, and dangerous or out of control.
- It takes a lot of energy
- It can prevent effective emotional processing and working through things. For example, in order to overcome a fear, we have to *feel afraid*. We can't just think it through – we have to *feel it* through.
- Over-using these strategies can lead to us being unsure what we are feeling any more. This can cause problems because our physical / mental sensations and emotions often contain useful information about what we need to do next, to take care of ourselves or move towards achieving our goals. Sometimes the distraction strategies cause other problems: for example, keeping busy to block out feelings can lead to more fatigue.
- Other people don't know how we are feeling – this can make it harder for them to get to know us or get close to us.
- We can spend so much time trying to distract ourselves or avoid certain feelings that our life isn't being lived in the way that we would actually like it to be.

### How can mindfulness help?

Through practising mindfulness we can become more aware of our direct experiences (physical sensations, emotions, thoughts) and can learn to distinguish between these and our reactions which can lead to added suffering.

Mindfulness can help us to gently stay present with all of our experiences, including unwanted sensations or emotions. We may learn that we are often

able to cope with these experiences and do not always need to push them away. We may sometimes observe that staying with the direct experiences can lead to them fading away or changing, or perhaps that new ways of responding will become apparent. We can gain more choices about how to respond in ways that do not add on an extra layer of suffering. Obviously we will not manage this all the time, but bringing kindness and self-compassion to ourselves can help us accept our unhelpful responses too, as a part of our moment-by-moment experience.

The only way to really understand this is to do it. This is the type of learning that cannot come from reading about it. When you feel ready, it is about taking the risk to stay with your feelings and not move away. Not in a harsh or punishing way, but in a very gentle, supportive and curious manner, as you would if you were holding a fragile and precious object in your hand and contemplating it closely. It is best to try with smaller or lower-level difficult feelings first, such as feelings of discomfort in your body as you meditate. As you build your confidence you may then feel ready to approach and stay present with more difficult feelings and observe what happens.

“The goal of mindfulness is not to feel better. The goal is to open up yourself to the vitality of the moment, and to thus have a greater opportunity to make choices that enable you to move more effectively toward what you value. The goal of mindfulness is to feel all the feelings that come up for you more completely, even – or especially – the bad feelings, so that you can live your life more completely. **In essence, instead of trying to feel better, mindfulness involves learning how to feel better.**

Being mindful and accepting means noticing that you are the sky, not the clouds; the ocean, not the waves. It means noticing that you are large enough to contain all of your experiences, just as sky can contain any cloud and the ocean any wave”.

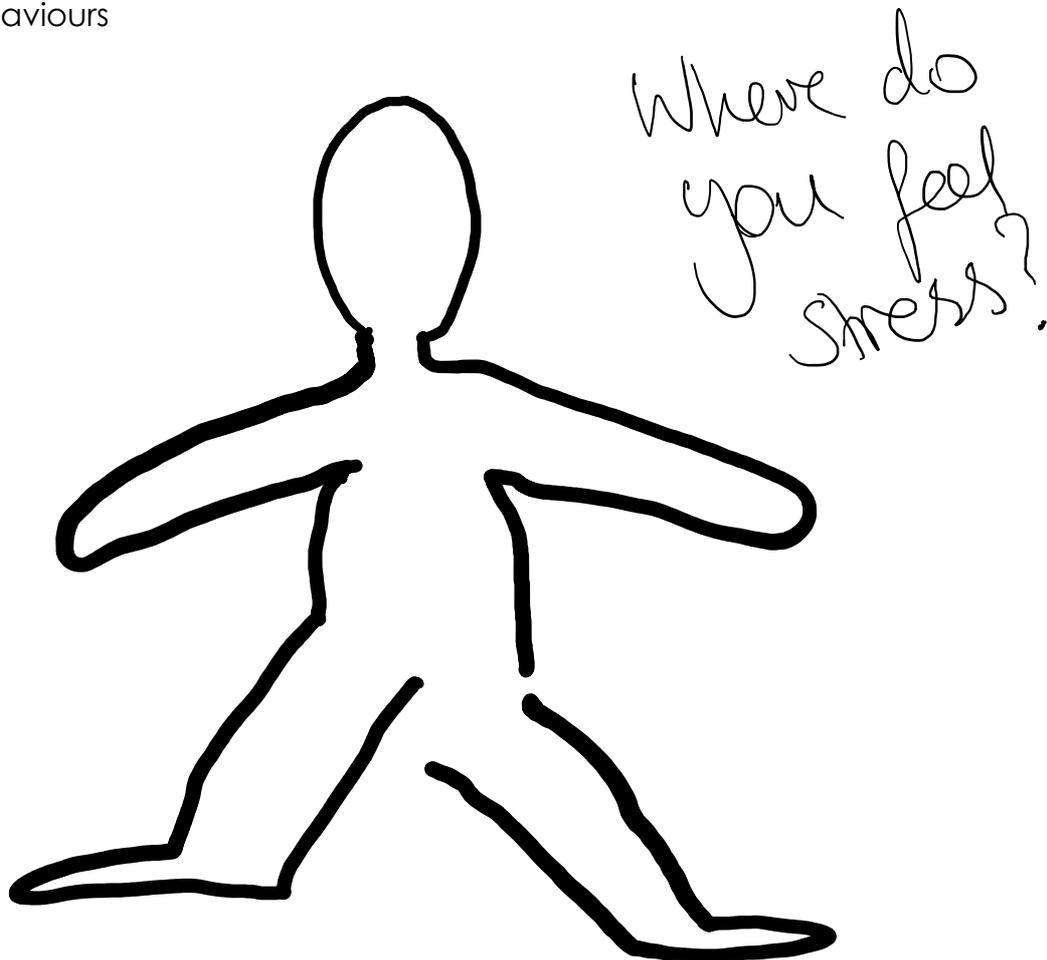
*Adapted from Hayes (2005). Get out of your mind and into your life.*

## Being aware of your threat system

### How do you know when you are operating within your threat system?

Take a moment to notice these and jot them down or draw on the body diagram

- Feelings
- Body symptoms
- Thoughts
- Behaviours



By noticing, and acknowledging our experience and allowing it to be there rather than fighting with it, we are immediately making a change, we are switching from the "fight and flight" threat system to the soothing system, allowing us to care and respond

## Helping the protective system to switch to care and respond

### Awareness

Being aware of what is happening and responding calmly will immediately help. It helps partly by noticing and naming the sensations that make up our experience, and partly by being aware when we are adding anxiety to an already anxious system. We can then take some action:

#### 1. Using sensory awareness

Be aware of our environment by working through the 5 senses, what can I see, hear, feel, smell, taste? This lets the system know where it is and that it is OK- no "tigers" here! It brings us to the here and now and take us away from thoughts about other times (the past, the future) that may be leading the protective system to work very hard.

#### 2. Using posture

When we are in the protective mode we hunch our shoulders, round our backs, clench our fists and jaw, ready to protect our bodies. We can often tighten and flex at the hips too and go up on our toes, ready to run. This is the flight/fight system at work and the protective element of the autonomic nervous system (oddly named the "sympathetic nervous system" as it doesn't feel very sympathetic!) is activated. If we have pre-existing pain we may notice that it responds unhelpfully to the increased tension.

To counterbalance this and activate the soothing part of the autonomic nervous system (known as the parasympathetic system) we can use our posture intentionally *despite how we feel* by:

Letting our body soften: lower the heels, feel our feet on the ground, ease out the knees, rise up through the spine and the head so we grow taller rather than flexed, open through the chest, roll back the shoulders and gently allow the hands to open. Drop the jaw and allowing the tongue to "float" in the middle of the mouth.

#### 3. Find an anchor

Where in your body do you feel you can anchor your awareness? It could be anywhere, such as your feet, the warmth of your hands, the movement of the belly or your back with your breath

#### 4. Use your gaze

In our protective mode gaze is often darting and rapidly focussing on different objects, scanning the environment for danger.

Try allowing the gaze to soften and widen, maybe by looking at the horizon, looking slowly around the place where you are: taking in colours, shapes, textures, not trying to name, label or judge what you see. And then, if it feels ok you can close your eyes.

### **5. Using facial expression**

There is some evidence that facial expression can affect how we feel, so gently softening the face and allowing a small gentle smile (not a grinning grimace!) to slowly develop.

### **6. Use the breath**

In our protective mode, our breathing can become shallow and rapid. Taking a couple of slow deep breaths, while we adjust our posture can help, then gently following the breath, perhaps breathing deep into the body, maybe putting the emphasis on the out breath. Go gently and if you notice any resistance, then go back to posture, gaze, sounds etc and maybe feel the movement of the breath.

### **7. Using a compassionate attitude**

All this with an attitude of "as best we can", friendly gentleness. Not to worry if we can't manage all this yet, we can also offer ourselves patience and kindness which our system will respond to.

We can talk to our systems using helpful self-talk, such as:

*"I know you are trying to help, but we don't need quite as much protection as you are offering at the moment"*

## **Practice**

### **Pausing with a difficulty (based on 3 step breathing space)**

When you are troubled by thoughts or feelings, or are experiencing difficult sensations in your body:

#### **1. Awareness and softening**

*OBSERVE* - bring the focus of awareness to your inner experience and notice what is happening in your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations

*DESCRIBE, ACKNOWLEDGE, IDENTIFY* - put experiences into words, e.g. say in your mind "A feeling of frustration is arising" or...."Self-critical thoughts are here" or "throbbing aching" and locate it precisely

Our instinct is to push them away: instead, as best you can, *gently allow* them to be here.

#### **2. Gathering and Redirecting attention**

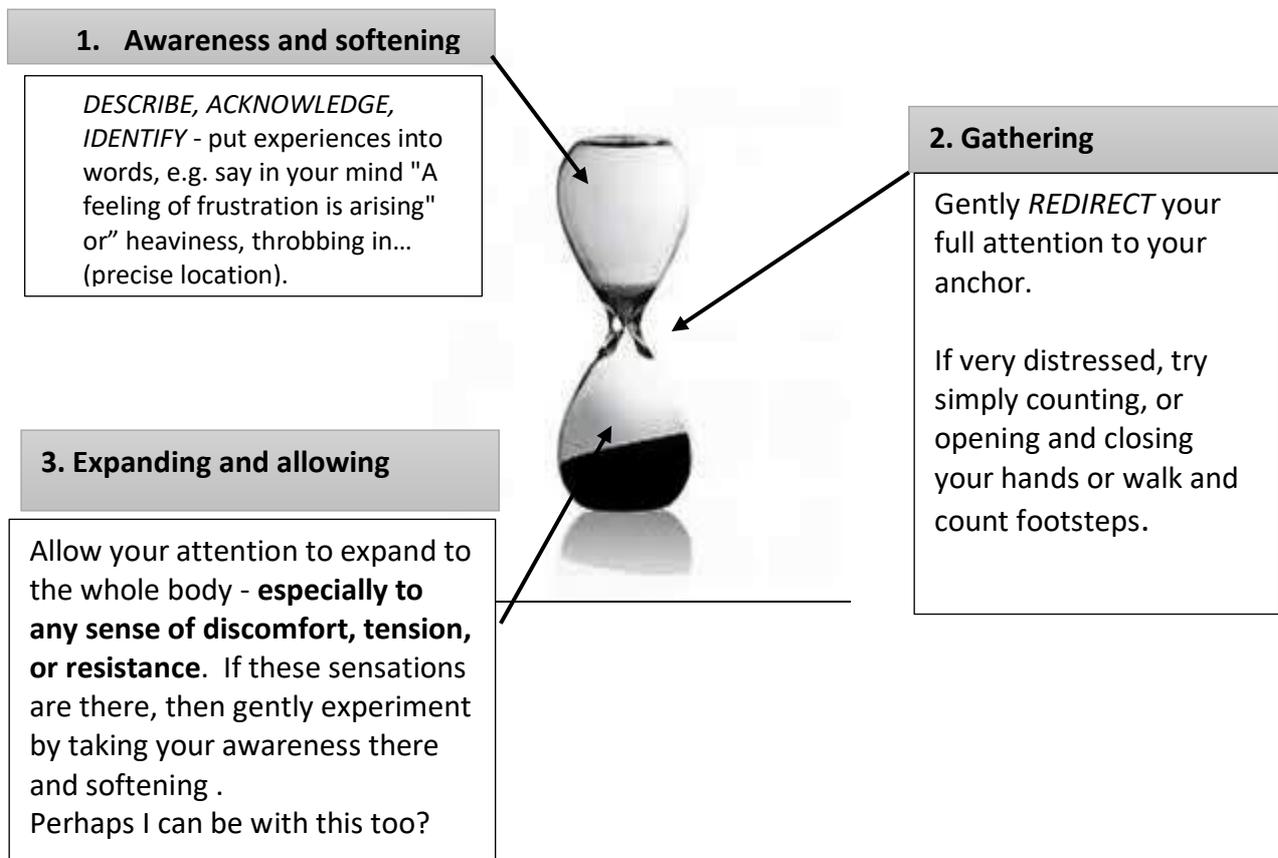
Gently *REDIRECT* your full attention to an anchor - soles of your feet, warmth in your hands, bottom on the chair, flow of your breath  
 If you are very distressed by body and breath, try simply counting, perhaps opening and closing your hands or walk and count footsteps.

### 3. Expanding attention and allowing

Allow your attention to expand to the whole body - **especially to any sense of discomfort, tension, or resistance**. If these sensations are there, then gently experiment by taking your awareness there and softening into them, perhaps moving or breathing "in to them". Say to yourself "Perhaps I can be with this too? Whatever it is, let me be open to it".

*Become aware of and adjust posture and facial expression.*

As best you can, bring this expanded awareness to the following moments of your day.



**Remember: mindfulness is as much about compassion and wisdom as it is about attention.**

## **Practising without guidance**

This week we invite you to try practising without a recording. These are some things to think about:

### **Your intention**

- What do you intend to do? How long for? Maybe use a timer.

### **Physical set up**

- Place- preferably not disturbed (if at all possible!)
- Choose posture and props you might need

### **Arrival/landing**

- Allow your body to land into the posture you have chosen, take time to allow movements, wiggles, feel the contact with the floor, chair etc
- Notice what you can see, hear – drop into sensory experience rather than naming, judging (e.g. colour, shape, volume, tone)
- Notice any additional bracing or tensing in the body and invite it to soften
- Scan through the body briefly allowing any parts to move, soften etc

### **Acknowledgement**

- Take stock of how you are right now -thoughts, feelings, and sensations: spend time on this, allowing opening. Your body may need to shift, allow this
- Find your feet; explore your contact with the surface you are on.
- Find your way into an open, upright or (gently lengthened) dignified posture; finding alignment from the inside.
- Let your mind settle on the movements of the breath or other anchor

### **Main practice**

Could be a body scan, mindfulness of breathing; sounds; thoughts

- Or you can sit and breathe and when your experience shifts to being very aware of sounds or sensations, become mindful of sounds or sensations, then return to the breath and so on.

### **Attitude** ♥

Practice kindness, patience, acceptance, trust, curiosity every *time* you return to your intended practice; every time the mind wanders off; when you realise you are impatient, judgemental, have fallen asleep..... 😊

### **Finishing**

Appreciate yourself for what you have done, what do you need now? How can you take the practice into the rest of your day?

