

MINDFULNESS SKILLS FOR TIMES OF DIFFICULTY

Sometimes there are periods in our lives that are full of difficulties, such as bereavement, illness, redundancy, relationship endings or divorce, overwork and other life stresses. During these times our mood may be lower than usual.

Also, when our mindfulness practice strengthens we can become aware of our deeply embedded patterns of thoughts and behaviour, which were often established in our childhood or youth. These deeper habit patterns can be difficult to face and come to terms with, and as we go through the process of accepting them, which may take some time, the emotions that arise can be overwhelming. It is beneficial to go through this process of acceptance because it results in the growth of our wisdom and compassion, but at the time the process can lower our mood and make our lives more challenging.

If you have recently suffered a traumatic life event or if your mindfulness practice is opening up trauma from earlier in your life, then the wise course of action may be to reduce or stop your mindfulness practice for a while, and instead seek help from a psychotherapist qualified in an evidence based psychotherapeutic approach. Also, there are strategies which we can put in place to more skillfully navigate our way through such difficult times and periods of low mood.

Formal Sitting Practice

Over the course of this training you are given home practice assignments and these require you to do a daily practice of 30 to 45 minutes sitting practice. In times of difficulty it is not uncommon to find that you are regularly becoming overwhelmed by emotions when you sit to do your formal practice. If this happens to you and you find that it is lowering your mood in your daily life or making life more difficult, then experiment with the following options:

- Use the RAIN exercise to help you come to terms with the emotions you are experiencing. If you still feel overwhelmed, it may be unkind to yourself to continue to sit in overwhelm. Here we work the 'edge' between approaching and staying with the difficulty and withdrawing from the difficulty. Only you can determine where this 'edge' is in your own practice, and it will be different from one day to the next, but if your practice is causing your mood to drop, this may be a sign that you are pushing too hard at the 'edge'. To withdraw from the 'edge', first acknowledge the difficulty you are experiencing and commit to come back to the difficulty in future mindfulness practice, as this helps to avoid suppression of the difficulty. Then get up and do some activity that you enjoy and that will distract you from the difficulty;
- Sit for shorter periods of time, for example 15 or 20 minutes, once or twice a day;
- Switch to doing a mindfulness practice that nourishes or soothes you and which is less overwhelming. For example, you may find that switching to mindful movement, body scan, compassionate imagery or mindful walking through the park or in the countryside is beneficial;

- Have a few days off from your formal practice and carry on with your informal practice, such as the three minute breathing space and mindful daily life activities.

Increasing Awareness of Pleasant Events

Even in the most difficult of times, there are pleasant moments to be experienced. Our minds have evolved to attend to and remember threatening situations as a means of survival. This means that unpleasant events can stick to the mind like Velcro while pleasant events can slide off the mind like silk. This natural tendency can be reinforced by our mindfulness practice in daily life in which we practice becoming present when a difficult situation arises, so as to create space to respond skilfully rather than reacting automatically. To counteract this tendency to focus on unpleasant events, we practice attending to pleasant events in our daily life. The pleasant event might be anything from sipping a nice cup of tea, to feeling the sun on your face, to swimming with turtles in Barbados, or to seeing a child at play.

When we encounter difficulties in life or low mood, one approach is to attend more closely to pleasant events. In order to do this, we can use the pleasant events calendar below. In daily life we can have the intention to become aware of at least one pleasant event every day, as the event is happening. Then later we can fill out the details of the event in the pleasant events calendar. By living our lives with the intention to become mindful of pleasant events, we gradually develop the habit of becoming more aware during the pleasant moments in our day. This enables us to deeply experience the pleasant events in our lives and the thoughts, physical sensations and emotions that go along with them.

Pleasant Events Calendar

	<i>Example</i>	<i>Day/date</i>	<i>Day/date</i>	<i>Day/date</i>
<i>What was the experience?</i>	Meeting a good friend while shopping who I hadn't heard from in a long time			
<i>Were you aware of the pleasant feelings while the event was happening?</i>	Yes			
<i>What sensations did you experience in the body during the experience?</i>	Smiling across mouth; aware of some excitement in the chest; a lot of energy in the body			
<i>What moods, feelings and thoughts accompanied the event?</i>	Surprise and mild excitement at speaking to her; felt happy talking to her again			
<i>What's in your mind now as you write this down?</i>	It was a short meeting and I'm surprised how good it made me feel to see her			

Adapted from *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Nourishing and Depleting Activities

Depleting activities are activities that we do in our daily life which drain our energy and lower our mood, such as frustrating or repetitive aspects of our job, staying up too late, drinking too much alcohol, getting stuck in traffic or conversations with particular people.

Nourishing activities are activities what we do in our life that give us pleasure, boost our energy and improve our mood, such as taking a nice long bath, going out with a friend, going for a walk, listening to music or watching an uplifting movie or TV programme. Nourishing activities also include activities which give us a sense of accomplishment or mastery because we are getting things done, for example, finishing a task we have been avoiding doing, like doing the housework or writing a letter. Think back and remember if there are any activities that you used to do which nourished you.

Take time to reflect over the activities you do in your daily life and place each activity in the appropriate column in the table below. Be specific and detailed about these activities.

Depleting Activities	Nourishing Activities

Adapted from *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression* by Segal, Williams and Teasdale

Then once you have completed your list, take steps to reduce the number of depleting activities you engage with in your daily life. You may not be able to avoid some of the depleting activities, so think about how you can change the way you engage in these activities so as to make them less depleting.

For example, if you have an activity that depletes you and which you cannot avoid, then you could perhaps try one of the following options:

- make that activity one of your mindfulness practices, staying mindful as you do it
- commit to get the activity done first thing in the morning or straight away, so that you are not anticipating it all day
- break the activity up into manageable chunks interspersed with more enjoyable activities
- contemplate any beneficial results that arise from completing this activity to make it more meaningful

Try to be creative in developing strategies to reduce or change the way you engage in depleting activities.

Also, schedule into your day more nourishing activities. You can start by adding one or two new nourishing activities and then gradually add more. Again, be creative.