

Session 3

Movement with fatigue, pain and other symptoms

Many of us, especially if we have been living with a chronic condition find it difficult to begin to exercise because it involves discomfort or strain and our current physical ability is often significantly less than previously. Who wouldn't want to tune out of body sensations and the thoughts and feelings it brings up (about ourselves, the future, fear, disappointment, frustration), if the experience has been too unpleasant too often? But in the long run, this doesn't really work as ultimately we run the risk of doing less and less with our body, and losing our trust and confidence in it and in what it can do, and in ourselves. There is also evidence that the less we do, the more our mind can become very sensitive to all kinds of physical sensations, and interpret them as threatening, which perhaps leads naturally to a sense of wanting to protect ourselves, but which can just make things worse. So how can we learn to tune back in to our experience without being overwhelmed?

Being with our body as it is now

We need an effective way of allowing ourselves to experience ourselves just as we are. Mindful movement offers us the opportunity to be with our minds and bodies in the spirit of curiosity, kindness and openness, all of which we have begun to cultivate in practicing the body scan, and very different from the usual habitual reactions which we may have developed over the years. It involves seeing clearly and gently letting go of the screen of any fear laden or driven thinking and expectations that might be present.

Soft and hard edges

One way of working with movement is to be aware of our "edge". The soft edge is where you just become aware of the movement, if you are pushing or going fast you won't notice it. The hard edge is the last point of the movement before strain happens. You know when you are at the hard edge because you will feel as though you are forcing that part of your body.

Let's imagine that we have our hands above our heads and we begin to feel discomfort in the shoulders or back. One way we can react is to back off as soon as we feel any discomfort, lowering our arms and turning our attention to some other part of the body or out of the body altogether. Another possibility is to grit our teeth, tell ourselves we just have to put up with increasing pain and discomfort and not make a fuss. We might then put even more effort into pushing ourselves to stretch further. Here too we

might numb out, removing our awareness from those regions of the body experiencing discomfort.

Working between the soft and hard edges

The most creative place to work is somewhere in the middle- that strikes a balance between withdrawing at the first sign of discomfort and forcing ourselves to meet some self-imposed standard of endurance. The challenge of mindfulness is to approach the experience in a spirit of gentle nurturing. We direct the attention into the area of discomfort, using the breath to bring a friendly awareness into the region, as in the body scan. We can then explore what we find there - physical sensations coming and going and changing; noticing thoughts, feelings and impulses arising, and allowing them to come and go in awareness. We can play with intensity by varying the stretch and seeing how the body actually responds to every tiny change we introduce. This can give us some sense of being able to modulate the intensity of unpleasant sensations and learn how to relate to them, and our bodies as a whole, in a more playful and experimental way.

Working between the edges means that you are aware of the movement or stretch and can sustain it but not so intense you have to stop. The edge will change from day to day.

In this way, we are much more likely to develop a more positive relationship with the body and have a sense of contributing to its wellbeing. We are also nurturing the qualities of kindness and compassion and goodwill towards ourselves, and weakening our tendency to avoid unwanted experiences, and the accompanying stress and fatigue that this entails.

Practice

If you let go of expectations or goals and approach each moment of practice with a gentle curiosity and openness, you are more likely to learn to trust what you experience and know better how to work with your body.

The only discipline involved is regular and frequent practice.

*Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror
Up to where you are bravely working.*

*Expecting the worst, you look and instead,
Here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see*

*Your hand opens and closes.
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
You would be paralysed.*

*Your deepest presence is in every small contracting
and expanding,
The two as beautifully balanced and coordinated*

As bird wings

By Rumi