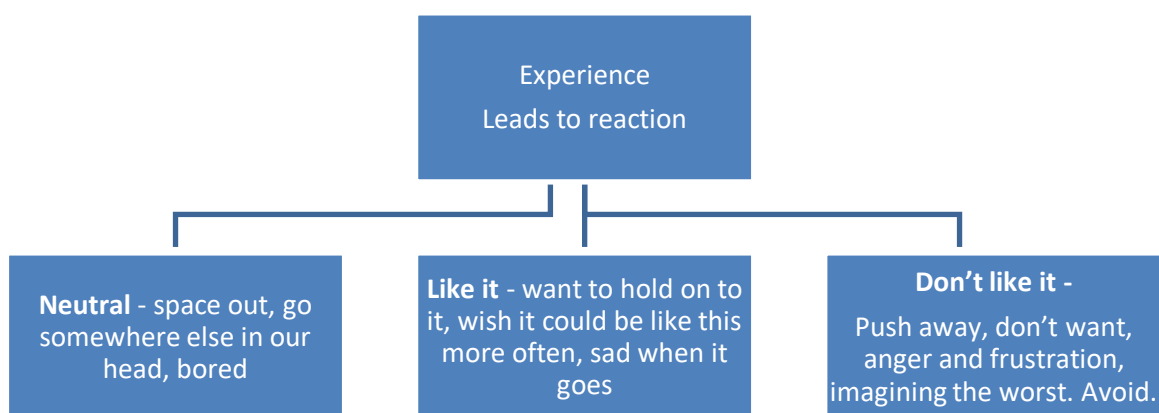


Summary of Session 4 – Staying Present

Difficult things are part and parcel of life itself. It is how we handle those things that make the difference between whether they rule (control) our lives or whether we can relate more lightly to them. Becoming more aware of the thoughts, feelings and body sensations evoked by events gives us the possibility of freeing ourselves from habitual, automatic, ways of reacting, so that we can, instead, mindfully respond in more skilful ways.

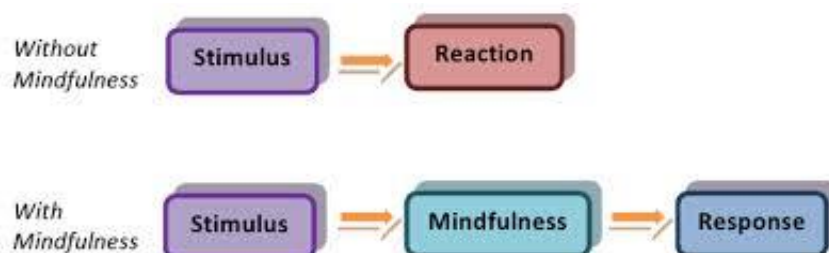
In general, we react to experience in one of three ways:

- with spacing out, or boredom, so that we switch out from the present moment and go off somewhere else "in our heads"
- with wanting to hold on to things not allowing ourselves to let go of experiences that we are having right now, or wishing we were having experiences that we are not having right now.
- with wanting it to go away, being angry with it wanting to get rid of experiences that we are having right now, or avoid experiences that may be coming along that we do not want.



As we will discuss further in class, each of these ways of reacting can cause problems, particularly the tendency to react to unpleasant feelings such as tiredness with aversion.

For now, the main issue is to become more aware of our experience so that we can respond mindfully rather than react automatically.



Practice

Regularly practising meditation gives us many opportunities to notice when we have drifted away from awareness of the moment, to note with a friendly interest whatever it was that took our attention away, and to gently but firmly bring our attention back to our focus of attention, reconnecting with moment by moment awareness. At other times of the day, deliberately using the Breathing Space whenever we notice unpleasant feelings, or a sense of "tightening" or "holding" in the body, provides an opportunity to begin to respond rather than react.

The body as a gateway to presence

Remember to use your body as a way to gain awareness. It can be as simple as staying mindful of your posture. What are the sensations in your body at this moment? When you finish reading, if you have been sitting to read, then stand, feel the movements of standing, of walking to the next activity, of how you lie down at the end of the day. Be in your body as you move, as you reach for something, as you turn. It is as simple as that.

Just patiently practise feeling what is there (and the body is always there) until it becomes second nature to know even the small movements you make. If you are reaching for something, you are doing it anyway; there is nothing extra you have to do. Simply notice the reaching. You are moving. Can you train yourself to be there, to feel it?

It is very simple. Practise again and again bringing your attention back to your body. This basic effort, which paradoxically is a relaxing back into the moment, gives us the key to expanding our awareness from times of formal meditation to living mindfully in the world. Do not underestimate the power that comes to you from feeling the simple movements of your body throughout the day.

Adapted from: Joseph Goldstein *Insight Meditation*

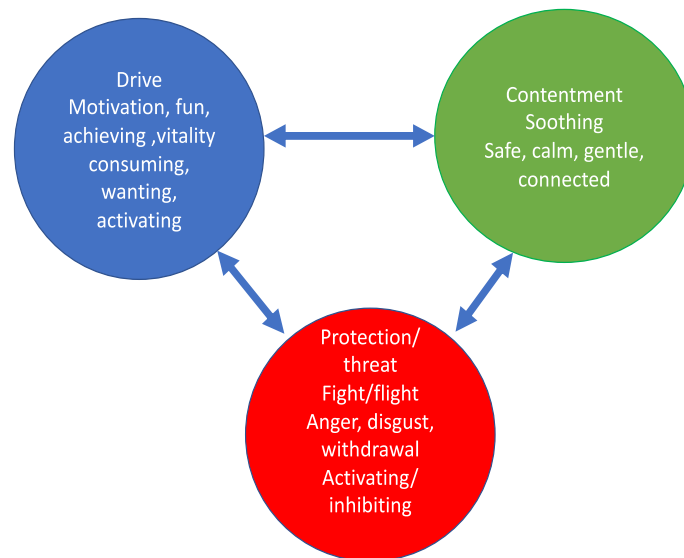
3 system model of emotion

For further reading, see the Compassionate Mind Workbook by Chris Irons and Elaine Beaumont.

The three emotional regulation systems are all necessary for survival, optimum health and wellbeing. Problems only arise when they become out of balance which can happen with chronic illness, pain or prolonged stress. For example, when the threat system becomes overactive we can flail around in fight or flight mode, desperately resisting our experiences and becoming increasingly frantic.

If the achievement system is overactive we may drive ourselves too hard and become stressed. Conversely, not enough drive and achievement can leave us feeling lethargic, bored and depressed.

Emotional regulation systems



Being out of balance can fuel the boom and bust patterns of activity seen in chronic health conditions.

Mindfulness can help us be aware of which mode we are in and to become aware of our choices and what we can do to take care of ourselves.

This system enables us to bring a certain soothing, quiescence and peacefulness to the self, which helps to restore our balance. When animals aren't defending themselves against threats and problems, and don't need to achieve or do anything, they can be content. Contentment is a form of being happy with the way things are and feeling safe, not striving or wanting; an inner peacefulness. When people practice meditation and 'slowing down' these are the feelings they might report; not wanting or striving, but feeling calmer inside and connected to others. This is quite a different positive feeling from the hyped-up, excitement or 'striving and succeeding' feeling of the drive-excitement system. It is also different from just low levels of threat, which can be associated with boredom or a kind of emptiness.

Soothing and Contentment System

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Affection and kindness

What complicates this system, but is of great importance for our exploration of compassion, is that it is also linked to affection and kindness. For example, when a baby or child is distressed the love of the parent soothes and calms the infant. Affection and kindness from others can also help to soothe us as adults when we're distressed. When we feel soothed we have feelings of safeness in our everyday lives. These feelings of soothing from kindness and support help us feel safe. They work through brain systems similar to those that produce peaceful feelings associated with fulfilment and contentment. Substances in our brain called endorphins are important for the peaceful, calm sense of well-being. These are also released when we feel kindness.

There is also a hormone called oxytocin which links to our feelings of social safeness and affiliation. This hormone (along with the endorphins) gives us feelings of well-being that flow from feeling loved, wanted and safe with others.

You can explore for yourself what contentedness or kindness is like by simply remembering what your body feels like when you are content, or when others have been kind to you or when you feel kindness for yourself. When you feel safe and content, what do you attend to and think about? How do you behave when you're safe and content, even mildly? Okay, some of use might struggle here so we might need to use our imagination to guess how that might feel, but have a go.

from Paul Gilbert

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/GILBERT-COMPASSION-HANDOUT.pdf>