

Session 6 notes

Mindfulness and thoughts

The mindfulness approach to thoughts is perhaps different to what we normally do. It is not about positive thinking, changing thoughts or even doing anything with them at all...

It is more about treating thoughts as events perhaps in much the same way as we experience sounds.

For example, if we hear sounds we are aware that some sounds we like and some sounds we dislike, we know that sounds come and go and that we can experience relief for example when the sound of drilling stops.

Could thoughts be treated in the same way? We have many thoughts every day, some of them are not even our own: they can come from what others have said today or in the past; what we may have read or seen in the media etc.

With mindfulness of thoughts, instead of paying attention to the content of our thoughts, we watch the thoughts come and go perhaps like clouds across a blue sky or as if we are standing behind a waterfall and watching the water torrent in front of us. Some people find imagining they are watching their thoughts as if they were on a screen in the cinema, this metaphor is helpful as terrible things can happen on a screen but the screen itself is not damaged. Or, using the metaphor of a television, change channels and different images are there.

Mindfulness of thoughts practise

Establish your sitting or lying posture, ease out any tension and find a posture that allows alertness.

Notice the movement of your body with the breath.

Notice the mind wandering then gently return your attention to the breath.

Notice any tension or bracing ease that out if possible then returned to the movement of the breath.

Stay with mindfulness of the body and breath for a few minutes

Notice the sounds that are around you, the volume the pitch, the direction. Notice the changing nature of sound. Be aware of the spaces between the sounds and the silence amidst the sounds.

Return to the breath, the body.

When the mind wanders, instead of returning to the breath and the body, become aware of the process of thinking, of thoughts arising perhaps as if they were clouds moving across a blue sky. Sometimes you may notice there are a lot of clouds and you cannot see the blue sky. When you become aware that you are following a train of thought (or in the screen metaphor, have jumped into the action and it feels very real) come back to the breath then watch the thoughts come and go again.

If you notice tension arising, then ease that, breathe and then resume mindfulness of thinking.

When you do this practise, you may become aware of regular repetitive thoughts or thoughts that arise at particular times. This is an opportunity to identify the role of thoughts in your health condition.

Thoughts in the “Boom and Bust cycle” of pain and fatigue

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that might send us around the boom and bust cycle of reacting, such as:

- 'I've *got* to get *all* of this done' or
- 'there's no point doing *anything* because I feel tired'.

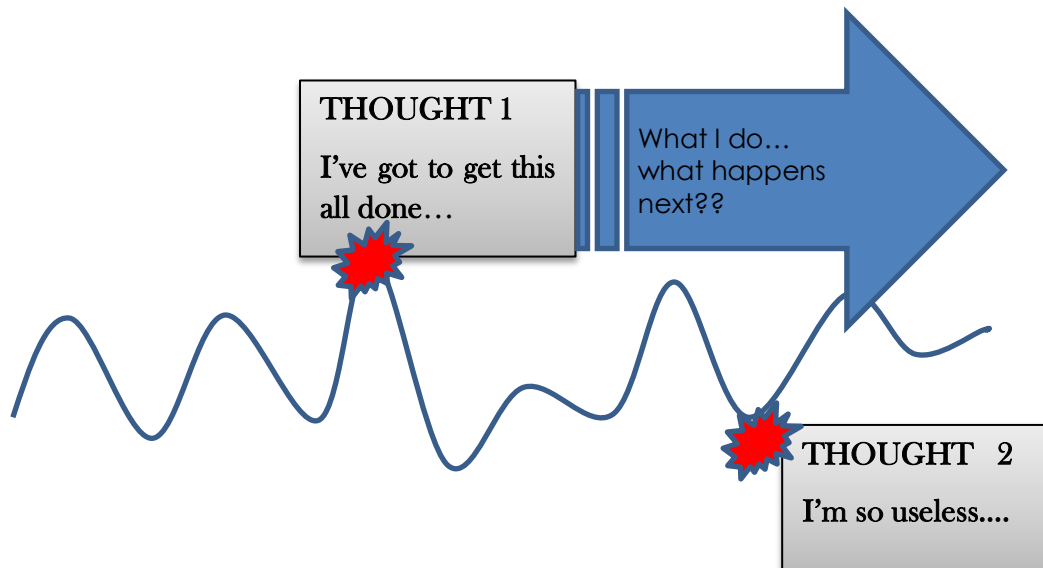
Such thoughts can get in the way of wise responding. They can hold us back from relating to our bodies with a friendly tolerance and building up activity/ exercise gradually, or at other times pacing ourselves so we don't overdo things and leave room for nourishing ourselves.

Pessimistic and hopeless thoughts like

- 'nothing's ever going to change',
- "why can't I be like I used to be"

can make us feel down and are one of the main factors that stop us taking actions that would help us to get out of those states. It follows that it is particularly important to recognize such thoughts as "negative thinking", and not automatically to give up on efforts to approach our experience in a different way.

How thoughts may affect us in the boom and bust cycle of pain and fatigue



Common Thoughts in the boom and bust cycle

How many of these do you recognise? How do they affect how you feel and what you do?

1. I'm tired and achy now so I'll feel like this for the rest of the day.
2. Other people's needs are more important than mine.
3. There's no point starting this unless I can finish it.
4. I should always do things really well.
5. Everyone else would do this activity better than I am doing it.
6. I'm not the person I was.
7. It's better not to talk to anyone about how I am feeling, it might upset them.
8. I should be able to cope with this.
9. I can't do this as well as I used to.
10. How am I going to get everything done, I've got so much to do.
11. I feel tired but it would bother me if I left the job half-done so I'll finish it anyway/ not start at all.
12. I must be careful what I do today, in case I feel worse tomorrow.
13. Taking breaks is a waste of time, I should be able to just keep going.
14. I feel better today, I need to catch up
15. I feel better today, there's nothing wrong, I'm just lazy

*adapted from Surawy and Roberts

Relating To Thoughts

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and that they are not “you” or “reality”.

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: "Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge." They can drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and the impact they have on our lives, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arising and passing, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind; we can see them for the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. Which thoughts will we invest in? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which to act on and which simply to let be.

Adapted from: Joseph Goldstein *Insight Meditation*

One patient, Peter, who had had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realization of this one night when he found himself washing his car at ten o'clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn't have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today, because he was already so completely caught up in believing it.

Each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises, and we register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and consider its accuracy, each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and to a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We are coming to know ourselves better and becoming more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be but as we actually are.

Adapted from: John Kabat-Zinn *Full Catastrophe Living* (pp. 69-70)

Ways you could see your thoughts differently

Here are some of the things you can do to see your thoughts differently:

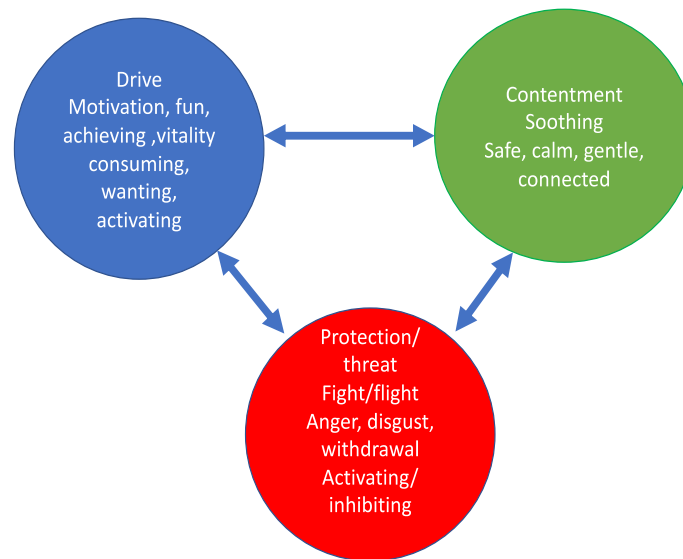
First pause, then, if you choose, deliberately turn your attention to your thinking:

1. Just watch thoughts come in and leave without feeling that you have to follow them.
2. View your thought as a mental event, rather than as a fact. This event may often occur along with other feelings, so that it is tempting to think of it as true. But it is still up to you to decide whether it really is true, and how you want to deal with it.
3. Write your thoughts down on paper. This has the effect of letting you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down can give you a moment to reflect on its meaning.
4. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - Did this thought just pop into my head automatically?
 - Has it arisen in response to a particular feeling or sensation?
 - Is there something about it that I can question?
 - Would it be here at another time, or in another mood
 - What would I say to someone I cared about who was troubled by this thought, and came to me for advice?
5. For particularly difficult thoughts, it may be helpful intentionally to take another look at them in a balanced, open state of mind, as part of your sitting practice let your "wise mind" give its perspective.

Remember that you can always choose to explore any intense body sensations associated with the thoughts and see what you discover.

Emotional Regulation systems

Emotional regulation systems



Drive system

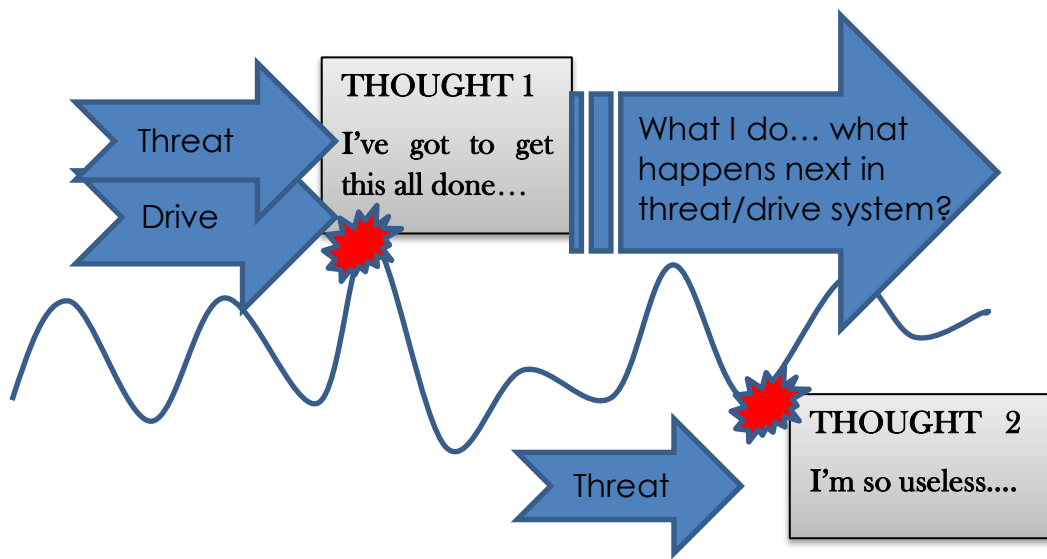
The drive system enables us to get things done and enjoy the buzz of achievement and satisfaction. It is what gets us going to make money, help others, go on holiday, mow the lawn etc etc. It can also mean we push ourselves, strive and over consume so it's a tricky line to walk.

Drive and threat in the boom and bust cycle.

Many people living with fatigue and pain find it is the urge to achieve things that can lead to them over doing activity and needing to rest more, which can mean they end up with less time to do things and so rush to get everything done and then find the threat system is driving them.

Catching thoughts that are driving the cycle can be very helpful and also enable us to create a space to respond differently.

How the emotional regulation systems may affect our thinking in the boom and bust cycle:



What could be the response if we were encouraging the soothing system (see session 4) to respond at different points in the boom and bust cycle?

Thought 1

Thought 2

How could this affect our activity?