



SESSION 4: RECOGNISING REACTIVITY

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

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

- with spacing out, or boredom, so that we tune 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.

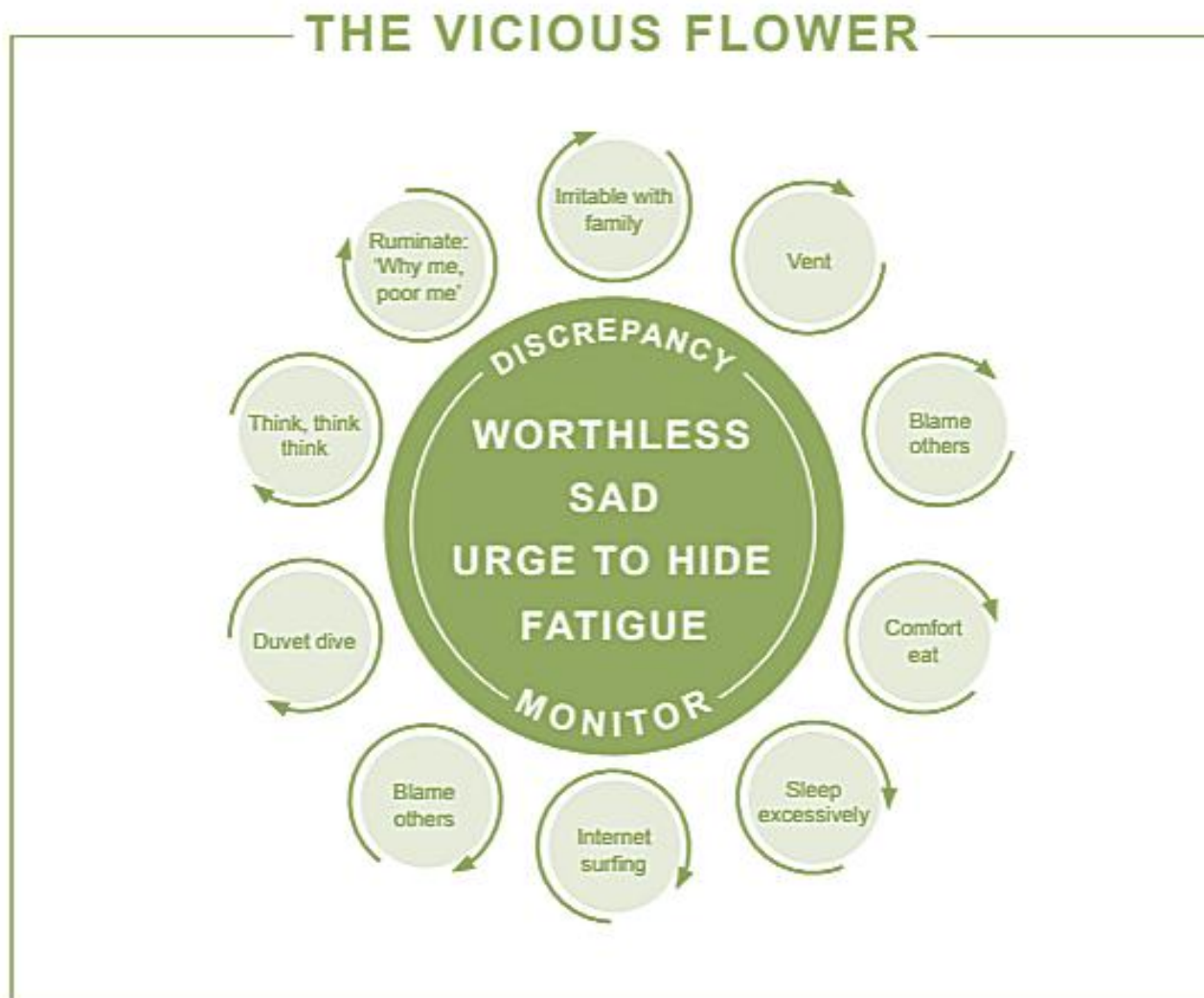
Each of these ways of reacting can cause problems, particularly the tendency to react to unpleasant experience with aversion. For now, the main issue is to become more aware of our experience and potential moments of aversion, so that we can respond mindfully rather than react automatically.

Regularly practising sitting 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 bring our attention back to our chosen focus. Deliberately taking a Breathing Space whenever we notice unpleasant feelings, or a sense of “tightening” or “holding” in the body, provides an opportunity to cultivate our capacity to respond rather than react. We create a space in which we can see things from a wider perspective and notice the choices and freedoms that we have.

The tendency to react automatically to things that happen in our external world is hard-wired within us and can help us to meet our needs and stay safe. Sources of pleasure such as food and companionship are important for our health and survival and so they elicit an instinctive attraction - we seek them out, move towards, and try to prolong and intensify them. By contrast, things, people and situations that lead to physical pain or emotional distress naturally elicit the opposite reaction: a sense of aversion and a desire to avoid or move away.

It’s not just the external world that can ‘press our buttons’ in this way. Internal experiences can lead to very similar patterns of reactivity. We may find ourselves repeatedly drawn to daydreaming about that planned holiday in the sun, whereas a worry or a sense of vague unease may very quickly bring aversion and wanting the mind to think and feel differently.

As we saw in the ‘vicious flower’ exercise during the class this week, when we experience pain or distress the mind often takes a route that seem to offer a way out but in fact keeps difficulties going or makes them worse. Reactivity to an event or an experience, especially when aversion and fear are present, can sometimes take us off down a well-worn path of difficult thoughts, feelings, and unhelpful behaviours.



THE TWO ARROWS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

Some suggest that pain (physical or emotional) can lead to two kinds of suffering: primary suffering is the unavoidable experience of distress caused by the pain itself. Secondary suffering is the added distress that comes with the anger, fear, rumination and resentment that often characterize our reactions to the pain.

This recalls some ancient teachings about our relationship with the inevitable pain and distress that are part of our lives. The teaching tells of a man who is pierced first by one arrow and then shortly afterward by another. The first arrow represents the unavoidable pain and suffering that we experience in our lives. The second arrow represents how we sometimes, unintentionally, increase our pain and suffering by our reactions to the first arrow.

Our experience teaches us that it is sometimes possible to relate to pain and distress quite differently. We can bring a kind and gentle awareness to the sensations, feelings, thoughts, and impulses that unfold. We feel the aversion and the tug to move away but we allow our experience to be as it is. Breathing with it rather than bracing against it. We hold ourselves with compassion. We are only pierced by the first arrow.

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

‘Not wanting to experience unpleasant feelings means we try to keep difficult or uncomfortable experiences at a distance – we don’t look closely at them. This means they can seem like vaguely threatening ‘big bad blobs.’ Notice carefully when you ‘de-blob’ unpleasant experiences by focussing attention closely on them – homing in on their separate components – body sensations, feelings and thoughts.’

From: The Mindful Way Workbook by John Teasdale, Mark G. Williams and Zindel V. Segal

BALANCING WHAT IS REACTIVE

What is it that is reactive? Our minds are reactive: liking and disliking, judging and comparing, clinging and condemning. Our minds are like a balance scale, and as long as we’re identified with these judgments and preferences, likes and dislikes, wants and aversions, our minds are continually thrown out of balance, caught in a tiring whirlwind of reactivity. It is through the power of mindfulness that we can come to a place of balance and rest. Mindfulness is that quality of attention which notices without choosing, without preference; it is a choiceless awareness that, like the sun, shines on all things equally.

Can we make our awareness so inclusive that we’re willing to be attentive to the whole range of our experience? It’s somewhat like going on a long journey in a strange land, a journey that takes us through many different kinds of terrain -through mountains and jungle, desert and rain forest. If we have the mind of a true explorer, when we’re in the mountains we’re not thinking, “Oh, if only I were in the desert now.” And when we’re in the desert we’re not daydreaming of rain forests. If there’s a real sense of exploration, we’re interested in every new place that we come to.

The experience of our meditation is a similar kind of journey; it’s the journey into ourselves through every aspect of our experience. There are ups and downs, highs and lows, times when it’s pleasant, and times of pain. There is nothing at all that is outside of our practice because our practice is to explore the totality of who we are. This takes a tremendous amount of willingness. Are we willing to be with the full range of what’s going on?

There is a line from a song written some years ago that relates to this: “Some people say that life is strange, but what I’d like to know is, compared to what?”. It’s all part of it. There is nothing that is outside of our practice. The different experiences of physical sensation, of pleasure or pain, the different emotions of happiness or sadness, depression or elation, interest or boredom, all are part of the journey. Is it possible to open to each one of these states, to become mindful of each one in a balanced way so that we can begin to understand their true nature?

Jack Kornfield Seeking the Heart of Wisdom

HOME PRACTICE INVITATION

A Formal Practice:

Do a Sitting Practice every day this week.

Remember the Home Practice Notes page is there to help you reflect on any issues that arise or that you'd like to bring to the next session.

There is a worksheet on the next page "Working wisely with reactivity." This is to support you in building on what was covered in the last session; you are welcome to use it as part of the home practice this week if it supports your learning. We will build on it in the next session.

You can access the meditation recording via this webpage link: <https://www.just-one-thing.co.uk/session4>

An Informal Practice:

You are invited to identify a stretch of corridor, pavement or footpath that you walk each day and that takes no more than two minutes to walk along. Make this your [secret!] walking path and practise devoting attention to the soles of the feet and/or the movement of the feet and legs when you walk this stretch each day. When the mind wanders, gently escort it back. Use the sensations in the feet and legs as an anchor that connects you to the present moment.

A New Habit In Everyday Life:

Take a Breathing Space: practise this 3 times a day, at set times that you have decided in advance. In addition, you might like to begin to take a Breathing Space at times when you notice that you are having difficulty staying present or when you are feeling stressed or thrown off balance to support you responding to these difficulties.

WORKING WISELY WITH REACTIVITY: NOTICING THE FIRST SIGNS

Losing our balance and getting lost in reactivity is part of being human. Sometimes life seems just too stressful to cope with. Difficult moods, such as sadness, anxiety, and irritability, can take hold of us. We may get caught up in negative thinking or in patterns of behaviour that create distress for ourselves and those around us.

What do you notice when these things are beginning to happen to you? Physical tension? Frequent worries? Easily irritated? Poor sleep? The worksheet on the next page offers an opportunity to increase your awareness of the signs that reactivity is beginning to take hold. Recognising these early warning signs, and realising what is going on, may put you in a better position to respond in a helpful way.

What are your triggers?

- Triggers can be external (things that happen in your life), or internal (thoughts, feelings, memories, worries).
- Look out for small triggers as well as large ones – sometimes something that appears quite trivial can spark a downward spiral.

What do you notice in your body at these times?**What feelings and moods tend to arise?**

What sort of thoughts run through your mind?

What do you do, or feel like doing?

What about habits of thinking or behaviour that might inadvertently keep things difficult or make things worse? The sort of things you looked at in the vicious flower exercise - for example, going over things again and again in your mind or avoiding things instead of facing up to them?

HOME PRACTICE NOTES

Feel free to use this page to make a note of anything that comes up for you, either as a reflection or as a reminder for discussion at our next session.
