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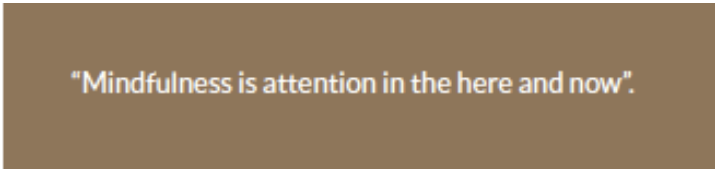
INTRODUCTION

This Training

MINDFULNESS DEFINED

Mindfulness is attention. This attention can be directed inside ourselves as well as outside ourselves. Attention to feelings, body sensations, thoughts or emotions are examples of attention to one's inside world. Attention to a conversation with a friend, trees in a forest, sounds or a book are all examples of attention to the outside world.

Mindfulness is attention in the here and now. Attention to the things that are happening in this very moment. This may sound easy, but how many times is our attention completely taken somewhere else by our thoughts? Although it is hard to deny that thinking is often very handy – we can make plans and solve difficult problems – at the same time, it is often the cause of many of our problems. Our mind easily gets lost in endless thinking (worrying and rumination). Our thoughts create emotions and feelings like fear and sadness. We lie awake at night because we worry about what might happen tomorrow. We can't stop thinking of that mistake we made last week. In our mind, we are constantly busy with the things that need to be completed. These are only a few



"Mindfulness is attention in the here and now".

examples of how our mind can make life difficult. Mindfulness teaches us how to deal with these problematic thoughts by using the focus of our attention in the here and now. Mindfulness helps us create a different relationship with our thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Mindful attention means attention without judgment. Often, sensations like tension or fear are automatically labelled as “bad”, “inappropriate” or “unwanted”. When we judge a certain feeling (“I experience fear, this is bad, I don't want to feel this way”) we automatically create a conflict; a conflict between the current feeling (“bad”) and how the feeling should be (“good”). Attempts to resolve this conflict, for instance by suppressing the negative feeling, require a lot of energy (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998), and paradoxically cause us to feel even worse (rebound effects; Wegner, 1994).

Acceptance plays a key role in mindfulness. Through mindful attention and acceptance, we allow every feeling, emotion, sensation or thought to be there. They are there anyway. Instead of fighting against feelings or thoughts, mindfulness fosters willingness to acknowledge, allow and accept these internal states. By letting go of this struggle and fight, we save energy (Alberts, Schneider, Martijn, 2011), and experience that the things we fight against, often fade away automatically; often sooner than when we actively fight against them. As soon as an emotion receives room to exist, one can experience the emotion as temporary; that is, the emotion comes and goes. In this way, one

becomes an observer of one's own inner states (the observing self; Deikman, 1982). One is no longer identified and completely lost in the content of thoughts or feelings, but becomes the observer of them. This observer still experiences the emotion or feeling, but now has the choice of being fully taken by them or not. By observing thoughts without judgment, one can experience their transient nature. In addition, we learn that not everything we think is true. In sum, mindfulness can help us identify less with feelings, emotions or thoughts. In other words, we are not our emotions or thoughts; we can simply be aware of our emotions or thoughts.

BALANCE

It is possible that this definition of mindfulness gives the impression that mindfulness means living in the present moment only, without thoughts about the future, and that we eliminate all automatic patterns of thinking. Mindfulness is about balance. For instance, there is nothing wrong with goal setting. Goals can provide direction, motivation and meaning toward a future state. However, problems occur when the balance between goals (future desired state) and the present moment (things we do in the present to achieve a desired future goal) is lost. In this case, it is possible that we are so focused on reaching our goals, that we forget to live in the present. Our life becomes a sequence of goals, our mind is constantly living in the future and we rarely enjoy the present. This can easily lead to frustration, especially when we notice that we fail to reach our goals in the anticipated time span (Boekaerts, 1999). In some cases, we even fail to reach our goal because of our obsessive focus on the goal (Wegner, 1994). Mindfulness helps us become aware that living in the present moment is the key to reaching goals. By focusing our attention at the present, we often become more efficient and effective in terms of goal achievement.

The same principle of balance applies to automatic behavior. In some cases, automatic patterns of behavior are very helpful. Driving a car, writing and making gestures are all examples of helpful automatic patterns. However, in some cases, automatic patterns can cause unwanted behavior, like responding aggressively when you receive a criticism, or automatically starting to worry when we appraise an event as negative. In these cases, mindfulness can help us to become more aware of these automatic patterns and build space to change them in order to create more balance between helpful and less helpful patterns.

Finally, mindfulness is a way of dealing with and perceiving reality. It can provide insights. Not by means of conflict or fighting, but by cultivating an open attitude and acceptance. It offers a different way of relating to reality than we are often accustomed to. You can decide for yourself whether this view is valuable or not.

WHAT IS NEEDED

This training will be most effective when you practice at home. This requires about 15 to 30 minutes a day. There are different types of exercises, like formal meditation and more informal daily practices. These exercises can both be valuable and fun, and will provide you with practical opportunities to link the insights of the weekly sessions to your personal life.

PATIENCE

The effects of your efforts will not always be immediately evident. You may compare it to gardening. You need to prepare the soil, plant the plants, water the plants and wait patiently for the garden to grow. Therefore, take your time to do the homework and try to do it to the best of your ability.

Advice 1:

Store this booklet in a clearly visible location. This will help remind you of the training and to do the exercises.

Advice 2:

Determine when and where to practice. Create a method that will drive your automatic behavior. For example:

When: every evening, after doing the dinner dishes Where: in my bedroom
What: I will practice seated meditation

THE MODELS

The models presented in this booklet aim to clarify certain processes. These models point to reality but are not the same as reality. In the same way that the word “hat” is not actually in reality a hat; reality is reality, and thus the models presented are simply models. Reality is far too complex to be completely translated into words, concepts, figures or models. Reality can only be experienced in the here and now, because reality is nowhere else. Models, words and concepts can provide insights and help to create experience, but can never actually be the real experience in and of itself.

WITHOUT JUDGMENT

We are very used to judging everything and everyone around us. We compare present experiences with past experiences or expectations and judge automatically. We experience something and we automatically start thinking what the experience means or whether it is “good” or “bad”. This process of judgment prevents us from being fully present in the here and now. We see the present through the lens of our judgment.

Trying not to judge is similar to trying not to think of a white bear. The more we try not to think about the white bear, the more we think about it. It is enough to become aware of judgment. During practice, notice when your mind judges, and direct attention in a compassionate way back to the practice again.

ENDLESSLY STARTING OVER AGAIN

Mindfulness is about starting over again, again and again. Once you get distracted during practice, gently redirect attention back again. You will do this many times. In fact, it is part of the exercise. In this way, you train redirection of attention, a crucial aspect of attention regulation. Mindfulness cultivates open awareness, the hallmark of a beginner’s mind. It is as if we look at reality for the first time. Like a young child who experiences something for the very first time.

WITHOUT STRIVING

It is perhaps the aspect of mindfulness that is most paradoxical and most difficult to explain; there is no goal to achieve in doing the exercises. This may sound very strange. People participate in mindfulness trainings because they wish to achieve the goal of worrying less, experiencing less stress, less pain, etc. The exercises aim to cultivate awareness of the present. Awareness of the present can hardly be called a goal, because goals are always related to the future. The problem is, that when we start doing the exercises because of a goal (I am now going to meditate because I want to become calm and relaxed), the goal not only focuses our attention on the future, we may also become aware during the exercise that we are not achieving the goal state fast enough, if at all. The goal of mindfulness is not to achieve a goal (like becoming relaxed or becoming the best meditator ever), but to be present with whatever arises in the present moment. Paradoxically, this type of awareness has been linked to several positive health-related outcomes, but can only be cultivated in the present, with a future detached mindset.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance starts with perceiving reality as it is right now. In the first place, acceptance is about acknowledging what is present. In general, we often see what we don't want to see and what we wish to see differently. We devote a lot of time to denying what is there. Consequently, we waste a lot of precious energy by resisting something that cannot be changed in the first place. During practice, both pleasant and unpleasant sensations, emotions and thoughts may arise. Instead of denying them and pushing them away, mindfulness requires willingness to let them be, as they are, in the present moment. Remember that the goal of mindfulness is not to get rid of these internal states, but to change one's relationship with these states. Mindfulness cultivates a more friendly, acceptance-based relationship with internal states. In other words, when unpleasant states arise, try to welcome them and perceive them as part of the exercise, part of reality. Let them be as they are.

LETTING GO

Sometimes, positive experiences arise during the exercises. People often want to hold on to these experiences. We attempt to prolong their duration and make them last longer. Open awareness means detachment of all events. In fact, when we try to change the course of positive experiences, we are doing the same thing as when we try to push away the negative states. In both cases we try to alter reality instead of experiencing it with an open, detached attitude. It is enough to observe and give the positive experience room to follow its natural course. The more freedom you provide for experiences to occur, the more freedom you will experience.

COMPASSION

Practice compassion. Don't be angry at yourself when you inevitably get distracted during the exercises. Thoughts and feelings will always arise. It is how the mind works. Every mind operates like this. Your mind is no exception. Awareness in this moment provides the opportunity to direct attention back to the exercise in a gentle, compassionate way. So be kind to yourself when you notice pain, anger or fear. Be kind when you notice that you judge, get distracted, that your mind wants to avoid pain. Practice friendly, open awareness.