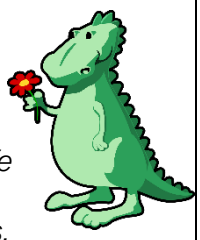
Meeting 4

Staying Present

"How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloudshadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries, or any depressions? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside you."



From: Letters to a Young Poet, **Rainer Maria Rilke**.

As you may have noticed, our mind wanders easily; we mentally time travel to the past or the future, or we're fully engaged in comparing ("Last week I felt much better" or "Yesterday I had a lot more fun working than today"). We often want things to be different than they are.

What drives us

In our lives we are usually driven by two impulses:

- We want to avoid unpleasant experiences, or get rid of them.
- We look for pleasant experiences, and often want to hold on to them.

Both motives take us away from the present moment, because we are paying attention to what we would like to be different instead of how things really are. The greater the difference between the situation as we would like it to be and the situation as it actually is, the greater the tension, and the more we feel that something *has* to change about the situation. 'Being present' with what is there in that moment is very difficult in this way.

Life is made up of pleasant and unpleasant events. Nevertheless, we spend a lot of time and effort striving for something different from what is actually present here and now. We often try to change things that (at that very moment) can not be changed. In this pursuit of 'something different' our contact with what is here and now becomes very superficial, because we are more concerned with how the situation *should* be than with what is *actually* there. In this case, we miss a lot of the experience of that moment.

The message of mindfulness is simple: by becoming more aware of what is happening *now*, what you are experiencing *now*, you can respond to it with more care and attention. But what if those experiences are unpleasant or painful? We'd rather get rid of those as quickly as possible. They evoke aversion or resistance. The automatic response is trying to avoid it: seek distractions, pretend it's not bad at all, or suppress the experience.

Wanting things to be different than they are now

Mindfulness invites us to allow worrying thoughts or feelings of uncertainty, anger, helplessness or sadness. Consciously focusing on negative experiences is not easy. And why would we? Why would we let unpleasant experiences get to us like that? One reason is simply because difficult things are part of life. By not fighting them, but recognizing them as they occur, automatically more space and softness arises and we generally know better how to deal with them.

But what about pleasant experiences? We often react to this automatically too. We want to hold on to the experience (attachment): a pleasant memory, a beautiful fantasy, a wonderful feeling. We want to keep enjoying it. Or we keep desiring or fantasizing about pleasant things that aren't there in the moment. Immersing ourselves in pleasant experiences can feel very nice.

At the same time, it also makes it unfree. Always looking for pleasant stimuli can make us restless, and wanting to maintain a pleasant experience can easily lead to frustration, because pleasant experiences pass too. The more we cling to such experiences, the harder it often is for when they disappear again.

For mindfulness, it doesn't matter if an experience is pleasant or unpleasant. For instance, we can recognize that we are cheerful, or in love, or relaxed. We notice it, for example how it feels in our body, what thoughts accompany it, without losing ourself completely in it. Without it hijacking us. Therefore we enjoy the feeling *as* it is there and as *long* as it is there.

Preference and dislike

We often respond to experiences in the following ways:

- we want to hold on to experiences *(attachment),* or experience something that is not here now
- we want to push away experiences *(aversion),* or try to avoid unpleasant experiences
- we are absentminded. We don't experience things consciously, but let our thoughts hijack them.

During the sitting exercises or in yoga, but also in our daily activities and contacts, we can pay attention to these automatic reactions. What experiences are we inclined to search for and hold on to? Which experiences would we rather not pay attention to, which ones do we want to go away? At what times do we get absentminded? When we encounter something unpleasant, we might ask ourselves, "What's going on? … Oh, I feel sad'. That's how we keep our attention from jumping to thoughts such as "I don't want this!". We can not prevent or stop these kinds of reactions, however we may get a better view of them. By becoming more aware of the automatic reactions of our body and our brain, they often lose their strength and we create more choices for ourself: how do we *really* want to deal with the situation, with this moment?

Dealing with pain and other discomfort

What actually happens when we experience pain? To begin with, there are multiple types of pain. Like the original (chronic) pain, which you might call trouble. We experience direct pain, in the form of a physical or mental disability, trauma, physical pain, fear, gloom, and so on.

As human beings, however, we are quickly inclined to respond to this internally with fighting, anger, resistance, longing for something pleasant and so on. So most of the time we actually add a little extra and experience double trouble.

Especially in the West, we then also condemn this unwanted imperfection of life, which makes us experience triple trouble. In this way we get caught up in a web of pain and stress, which is very understandable and human but also imprisons us.

Mindfulness offers the opportunity to witness these different types of trouble, without judging it.

Frits Koster, 2009

Stress signals

Another topic this week is learning to recognize signs of stress. These are not always easy to spot, and everyone expresses themselves in a different way. Usually it's a combination of signals. Such as:

- Signals in our *behavior*: lots of complaining and blaming, eating problems, withdrawal, passivity or restlessness.
- *Physical* reactions: sleeping problems, muscle tension, fatigue and headaches.
- Signals in our *emotions/moods*: feeling down, gloom, irritability, feelings of inferiority, mood swings, apathy and guilt.
- Changes in our *thinking:* worrying, forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating.

We can see these signals as protection signals: our body and mind signal us that something is going on. If we ignore these signals, the symptoms can get worse or chronic. Recognizing signs of stress is a first and important step. When we recognize the signals, we are often less overwhelmed by them and we also know better what to do. For this, it is important that we know what is happening in our body, and that we, to connect and stay connected to that information, take breaks throughout the day. We can use **the three step breathing space** for this.

Coping with stress

Difficult things, unpleasant experiences and stress are part of life. The way we deal with difficult things has a big impact on our lives. Sometimes stress can control our lives, like when we suffer from anxiety, depression or severe anger. It is therefore important to reflect on our patterns of dealing with stress. Below you will find some important aspects of stress.

Overall, there are 2 ways of responding to stress: *increasing* and *reducing*

Increasing
We allow the stress, but we increase our feelings or the situation. This can be the result of sitting on the couch for hours worrying about the problem, for example. Thoughts like 'This wasn't the first time!', 'Why is he behaving this way?', 'Why is this happening?' 'Why me?!, 'I'm not worthless, am I?', 'It's outrageous!' get free play.
When we increase, there is the stress of the trigger, but we also add stress that arises in *reaction* to the trigger. This creates an accumulation of stress, in which we sometimes no longer know what the stress is that comes with the first reason, and what stress is caused by our own reactions.

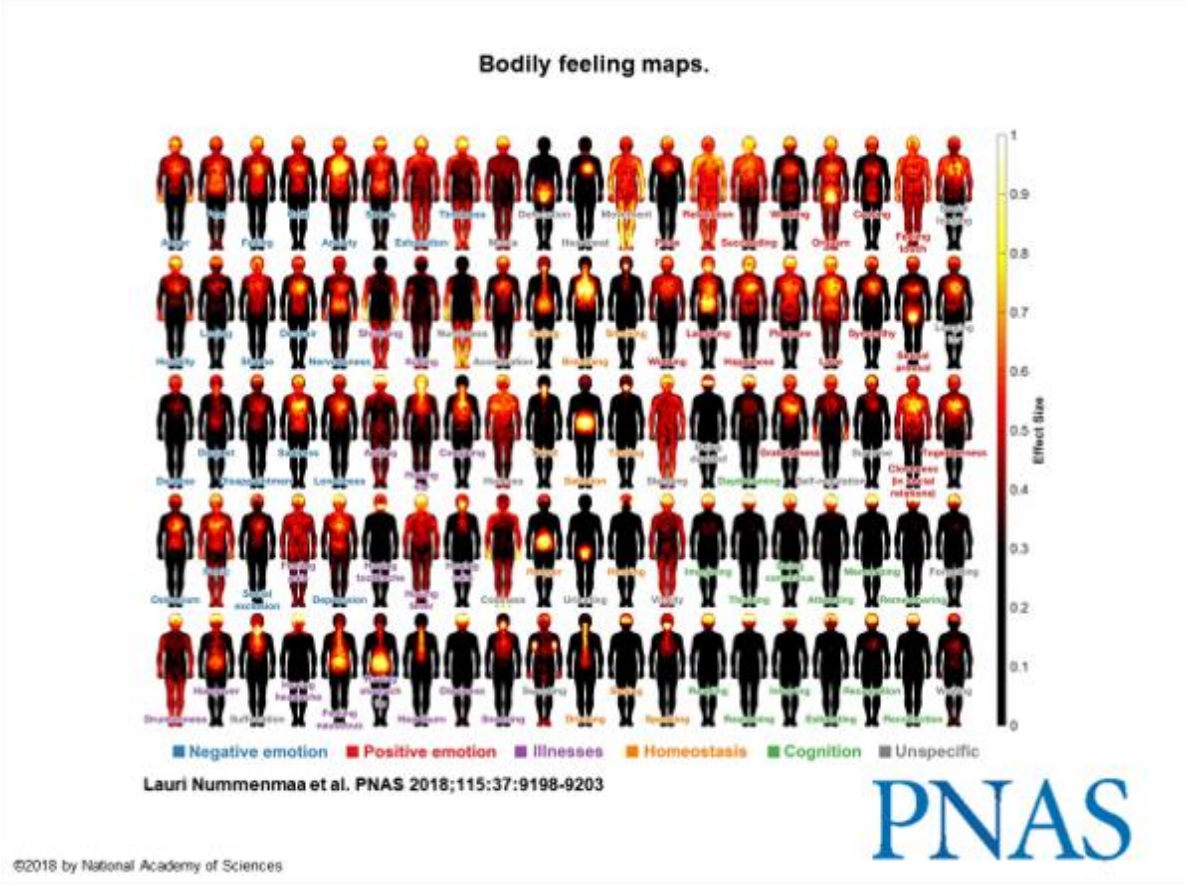
Reducing
We don't really allow the stress. We don't feel it because we deny it, or we laugh it off, and as a consequence we don't feel that we've been affected.
At first, minimizing seems like a pleasant solution, but again it is good to consider the consequences of the automatic pattern of reducing. If we reduce a lot and therefore feel little affected, a certain distance from our loved ones can arise. After all, our feelings and the fact that we can be touched or moved is an important part of our communication, and an expression of relatedness. Moreover, it can also happen that if we reduce a lot, we become more and more tense, without us being aware of the cause. A lot of tension can be built up unconsciously, that sometimes after years suddenly comes out in an unexpected form (burn-out, extreme anger, physical complaints and so on).

It is important to realize that both reducing and increasing are *automatic* patterns. We don't make a conscious decision to increase or reduce. This seems to happen on its own.

Evolution of coping with stress

Another way to examine our patterns of stress is to look at our stress patterns from an evolutionary process. In the stress response, an evolution can be recognized that corresponds to the development of our brain. From the most primitive and automatic way of responding to stress, to the more developed and conscious way of dealing with stress.

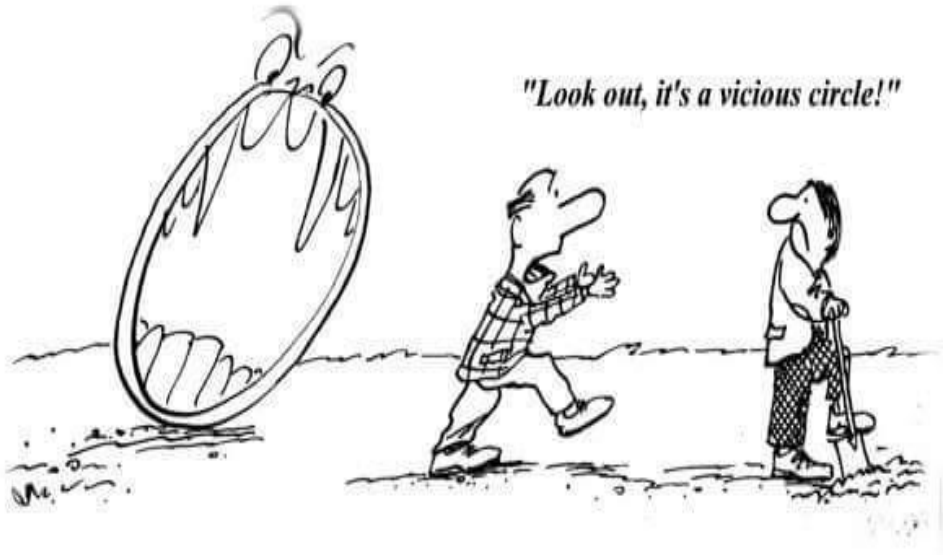
1. *The 'fight, flight or freeze reaction'*
   This is our most primitive response to stress. This reaction is ideal for surviving in dangerous situations. If there is an acute danger, for example if we are attacked by a dog, there will be a reaction of running, fighting or stiffening and hoping that the attack stops soon. We have little choice in this reaction because it happens in a reflex. It is our most basic protection mechanism for serious danger.



2. *The 'emotional reaction'*
   At this level of reaction, a stressful situation evokes emotions. These reactions also happen automatically and largely unconsciously. Some characteristic patterns of emotions that can be distinguished:

   - 'The victim': passivity, resignation, complaining and ruminating over 'why me?' (increasing)
   - 'The joker': cynicism, joking, trivializing problems, laughing everything off (reducing)
   - 'I don't care: indifferent, shut off from problems, it doesn't matter, it doesn't affect me, this is nothing' (reducing).
   - 'The short temper': irritation, anger, putting the blame elsewhere (increasing)

There are more patterns of reacting emotionally to stress. And as said: we don't choose to feel victimized or get angry. It just happens by itself. We all have emotional reactions to stress from time to time and this is usually not a problem either. Only if we become mired in a pattern, or always react with the same pattern, it makes us very rigid in our dealing with stress.



All the patterns mentioned are automatic. There's nothing we can do about it, but sometimes we realize that we're kind of getting into a pattern. The moment we see this happening, suddenly a choice arises: the choice to allow ourselves to feel what we feel, without wanting it to go away and without having to solve it. There will no longer be an automatic reaction, but instead a conscious response: **'staying present'.** One way to stay present is to apply the 3 step breathing space.

Awareness → Choosing to Stay Present → 3 Step Breathing Space

3. *'The conscious response'*
   If we have been able to choose to 'stay present' we can notice what is happening around us, but also what is happening within ourselves too. If we choose to 'stay present', we choose to feel and deliberately experience what is there.

   From this level we face the stressful situation, and allow ourselves to feel the physical sensations, emotions and thoughts that accompany it. We don't get completely sucked into our pattern, and we realize we're more than just our problem and automatic reactions. We have a broader perspective at our disposal. From this broader perspective we can often stay in the present moment more easily, and our reactions will be less influenced by resistance (from past experiences) or fear (from expectations about the future).
   The problem doesn't get automatically linked to all kinds of negative associations from the past. The breathing space helps us to become more centered. When we pause at what we're feeling, we often see that we can respond more intuitively, creatively and wiser to stress.

Conscious (wise) stress response

Stress ➔ awareness of physical reactions
awareness of emotions/moods
awareness of thoughts ➔ Stress response (conscious action)

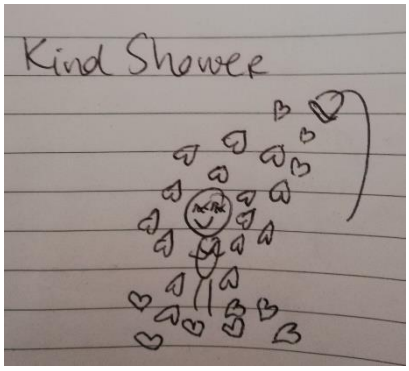
By bringing awareness to the physical reactions, the thoughts, the emotions and moods evoked by a stressful situation, we become more centered. We can see better what is going on, and we can consciously make a choice to act (or not to act) instead of being hijacked by an automatic pattern.

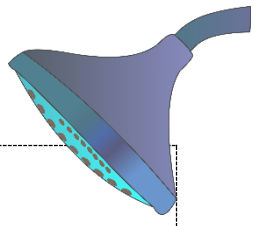
Actively focusing our attention on the physical and emotional reactions and thoughts in situations of stress, is not always easy and requires a lot of practice!
In such cases the breathing space can fit well. During this exercise we create time and space for the awareness of physical sensations, emotions and thoughts. Which creates a moment of choice before we react. While doing this it is important to keep infusing ourselves with a shower of kindness.

Three Step Breathing Space – responsive

In week three, the breathing space was introduced, as a way to step out of automatic patterns and get back into the moment. We can do the breathing space at fixed times, such as waking up in the morning, when we arrive at work/school, or when we go home at the end of the day. In addition, we can also do the breathing space if we notice that we feel down or tense. At such moments we can focus on what is going on in our mind and body. This we can do by creating space for what is happening *now* and allowing *all* experiences, without judging them, suppressing them, or immediately trying to solve them. After that we kindly bring our attention to our breathing and to our body as a whole.

The breathing space applied to stressful or unpleasant events is called the breathing space responsive. The structure of the exercise remains the same. The breathing space responsive helps us to reconnect with the present moment in stressful situations. Even then we can use breathing as an anchor. It is important to realize that by using the breathing space responsive we do not 'meditate the stress away'. It's not a trick or a quick way to get rid of our stress. It is not meant as an escape or shelter from reality, but a way to reconnect with it. And in this way it can help to avoid an automatic stress response.





3 Step Breathing Space Responsive

1. Paying attention to our experience of this moment in this stressful situation

In the first step of the breathing space responsive we bring our attention to our experience of that moment. We collect, as it were, all the elements of our experience from that moment. For example, we can ask ourselves:

What is my experience at *this* moment?
What thoughts come up while I think about this stressful situation?
How does it feel to me right now? Can I notice any emotions or moods that this situation evokes?
How does my body feel right now? What physical sensations can I notice?

As best we can, we allow our full experience of this unpleasant situation. Reminding ourself again that we are not doing this exercise to make us feel better, but that we are doing the exercise to stay present and be aware of our experience in this moment, however unpleasant it may be.

2. Focusing on breathing

Then we let the experience as we've noticed in the first step be and focus our full attention, in a friendly way, on the physical sensations of breathing. We don't try to change our unpleasant emotions, moods or thoughts or physical sensations. When they arise again, we can breathe with them without doing anything about them. The mere focus of our attention can be directed to the physical sensations of the breathing movement. Bringing the physical experience of breathing to the foreground.

Perhaps at this stage our attention might be drawn back repeatedly to thoughts or feelings in the unpleasant situation. If we notice this, we can, again, use the movement of breathing as an anchor to bring our attention back.

3. Expanding our attention

In the last step of the breathing space, we expand our attention, from a renewed perspective, from breathing to feeling and experiencing the body as a whole, to our posture and facial expression. If we notice elements of the unpleasant experience in our body, our emotions/moods or our thoughts, we can say to ourself 'Whatever it is, just let me feel it, it's already there anyway'. When we're ready, we can open our eyes again and- from this renewed perspective - get on with what we have, or choose, to do.

Experiencing the Breathing Space Responsive

A participant of the mindfulness training wrote the following:

“When I get emotionally overwhelmed with stress and other negative emotions my mind tends to wander around those thoughts, making it difficult to stay focused on the task at hand. Here, I have integrated the breathing exercise of the mindfulness training. I stepped out of my automatic response/habit to spiral down my negative thoughts. With the continuous application of this exercise, it has transitioned from applying it consciously to an automatic application in the case of my anxiety getting the better of me. After a little while, I notice that my mind has wandered, then I refocus my attention on my breath and keep it there. I repeat this process until my negative emotions and stress have subsided enough to resume my task.

This has especially helped me with the aftermath of me snapping at people in my close vicinity. In the beginning, it helped me refocus from tension and guilt. Now it helps me in draining negative emotions that may flare up before I even react badly. Here, I managed to make the tension rising between me and my roommates, my boyfriend, as well as his family almost disappear completely, especially in the exam period. It also helped me to snap out of my frustration with team members. When distressed with some responses I did the breathing exercise and was able to elaborately explain and defend my point. Sometimes I was able to make reason or gain reasoning quicker with less trouble than usual. This also lessened the tension that would usually be there.

The breathing exercise has become a foundation for me in becoming mindful.”

Sitting meditation: attention to breath, body, sounds and thoughts

Starting this week, we extend the sitting exercise to hearing and thinking. Hearing sounds without searching for them, as if we were to open the window and wait for the sounds to blow in. This way we can discover that sounds come and go, loud or soft sounds, high or low, far away or close by. We might also notice the silences between the sounds.

We often tend to box sounds in a meaning, for example: 'That's a car driving by'. We also often judge what we hear: 'How cozy this ticking of the rain on the roof is' or 'How annoying that my neighbor is sighing like that'. Sounds can also lead to associative thoughts like: 'Oh yes, I have to remember to do some shopping later!'. Once we find ourself thinking about sounds, we can first pause to acknowledge this and then redirect our attention to hearing the raw sounds themselves: pitches, timbre, loudness, rhythm, duration etc.

Like sounds, thoughts can also be noticed, that they rise, stay for a while and go again. This allows us to start seeing thoughts as thoughts, and become more aware of our brain’s ‘favorite’ thought patterns. In addition, we can recognize emotions and moods that accompany certain thoughts.

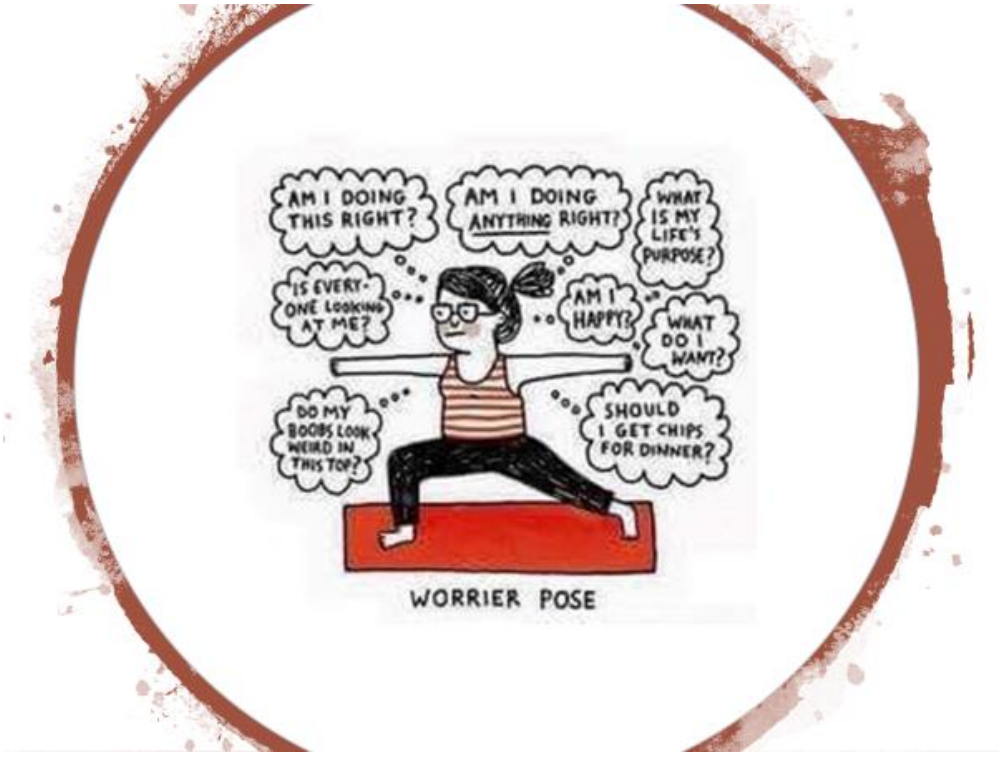
The body in motion

In the previous chapter it was already discussed: in the mindfulness training we focus on the body in motion for several reasons:

- A greater awareness of body movement makes us often more aware of our body's abilities. Usually we are only aware of our body when it limits us by, for example, feeling pain or discomfort. When this happens we are mostly fixated on our limitations, and are no longer open to consciously experiencing the possibilities. Experiencing even the simplest movements with attention can reopen us to wonder about the possibilities of the body, even if these possibilities are very limited due to pain or illness. In addition, it is generally healthy to exercise. Even with limitations, it can still feel comfortable.

- The mindful exercises help us in our research and awareness of how we deal with discomfort, and how we react to our body's limits. We may notice that when we feel discomfort we quickly no longer feel like doing the exercise anymore (that we encounter one of the challenges from chapter 2), and that we give up. Or maybe we notice that we don't want to lose face, and always try to get over the discomfort of an exercise. The exercises are designed to examine our automatic patterns in dealing with discomfort. The patterns we encounter, we will probably encounter not only during the movement exercises, but also in our daily life.

- The exercises of mindful movement ensure that we learn to feel and respect our limits better. It is important to tailor the exercises to the possibilities of our own body. It can help us realize that our limits can be different every day, and that we can re-examine every day what it's like to do the movements. It helps to perform the exercises with a friendly and curious attitude, and to not compare our performance with the performance of others or with our own performance yesterday.



Staying

"Constantly remind yourself that you can use your body as a way to awareness. This can be done very easily by paying attention to your posture. You're probably sitting when you're reading this. What are the sensations in your body right now? When you stop reading and stand, feel the movement of standing, of walking to the next activity, of how you are going to lie down at the end of the day. Be in your body when you move, when you reach for something, when you turn around. It's that simple.

Practice patiently with feeling what is there – and the body is always there. Make it second nature to notice even the smallest movements you make. If you're picking up something, you're already doing it; You don't have to do anything extra. Simply notice that you are picking up something. You're moving. You can train yourself to be in the present moment and you can develop that feeling.

It's very simple. Practice over and over again to bring your attention back to your body (as a means of being in the present moment). As paradoxical as it sounds, it seems like an effort, but it's relaxing to return to the present moment. It allows us to be aware not only during meditation, but to be much more aware in life. Don't underestimate the power you can experience by feeling simple body movements throughout the day.

Adapted text by ***J.Goldstein*** *(1993), Insight Meditation*

Home practice suggestions after meeting 4

1. Practice alternately
   - one day **Standing Exercise**
   - the other day **Mindfulness of Breath, Body, Sounds and Thoughts**.

   Each time you do the exercise, briefly write your experiences during the exercise on the exercise form. Remember: to rewire your brain: better by practice often and short, than sometimes and long.

2. Consciously pay attention to **signals of stress** (see list of stress signals below). You can tick the signals that you recognize in yourself. Also pay attention to automatic reactions to these signals (double and triple trouble): do you recognize in yourself when you don't want to have certain feelings, for example if they make you angry or feeling helpless, if you fight against them, worry endlessly about them or try to ignore, suppress or avoid them?

3. Do the **three step breathing space in two ways:**
   - three times a day at predetermined times, with last week's audio or the instructions on page 38,
   - every time you encounter unpleasant feelings: Three Step Breathing Space **Responsive**, with the instructions on page 52 or audio.

   Write down experiences in the exercise form.

4. Read the **information** belonging to meeting 4.

5. Watch Jon Kabat Zinn's documentary 'Meeting 4 - Film Jon Kabat Zinn – Healing and the Mind by Bill Moyers' (27m49).

6. Keep a **daily record** of your homework. Fill it in as accurately and honestly as possible on the exercise form. Bring the form to the next meeting.

Stress signals

Physical stress signals

- growing fatigue
- insomnia
- intense (and rapidly emerging) perspiration
- high blood pressure
- palpitations or heart rhythm disorders
- hyperventilation
- sexual problems
- stomach pain
- frequent, or sudden urinating
- cramped muscles (neck, shoulders, back, diaphragm, ...)
- abdominal pain, constipation, diarrhea
- headache
- dizziness

Behavioral stress signals

- restlessness and rush
- inertia, not coming to anything
- resort to standard solutions, loss of creativity
- compulsively try to keep doing everything, e.g. by making countless, impossible activity lists, clinging to agenda, working more and more overtime
- combative behavior such as intolerance and overt aggression
- increase in social conflicts
- flight and avoidance behavior
- fear responses: frantic and chaotic behavior
- few social contacts, or a flight in distraction and sex
- complaining about and blaming others, the organization and society
- lots of snacking, eating, drinking, smoking, drugs, drug use
- difficulties eating and/or binge eating
- little exercise or very performance-oriented sport that does not bring relaxation

Emotional stress signals

- anxiety, panicking quickly, startled
- constantly wary, tense feelings of threat
- gloomy, depressed, cast down, everything is more negative than it used to be
- less able to cope, quickly tired, things get too much easily, quickly experience something as a struggle
- tired when getting up
- dreading the day in the morning
- boredom, not being able to enjoy, lethargic
- discontent, disappointment
- shame and guilt
- indecisiveness, uncertain
- apathy, feeling unmotivated
- crying quickly, vulnerable
- feeling inferior, low self-esteem, feeling inadequate
- phobias (fear of going on the street, for escalator, in shops, etc., ...)
- rushed, tense, unable to find peace, not being able to sit quietly
- irritable, impatient, short-tempered, irritation over small things
- many mood swings
- anger, anger outbursts, easily upset, short fuse
- excessive vigilance, not being able to relax, not being able to enjoy

Mental stress signals

- concentration disorder, absentminded, easily distracted, unable to focus or rest for an extended period of time
- difficulty listening to others, struggling to do things you normally/used to like, such as reading a book, watching TV, writing a report, drawing, hobbies, etc.
- memory seems worse, more difficulty remembering and processing information, forget a lot
- searching for words, difficulty formulating
- difficulty organizing, structuring, sorting things out
- no future perspective, black and gloomy, seemingly cut off, no (new) initiatives
- worrying and ruminating, thoughts keeping you awake at night

EXERCISE FORM WEEK 4

Keep a daily record of your homework every day. Fill it in as accurately and honestly as possible.

DAY	PRACTICED YES/NO	NOTES
DAY 1 Date:	Yoga / Sitting meditation 3 Step Breathing Space: • Regular 3x: • Responsive Stress signals:	
DAY 2 Date:	Yoga / Sitting meditation 3 Step Breathing Space: • Regular 3x: • Responsive Stress signals:	
DAY 3 Date:	Yoga / Sitting meditation 3 Step Breathing Space: • Regular 3x: • Responsive Stress signals:	
DAY 4 Date:	Yoga / Sitting meditation 3 Step Breathing Space: • Regular 3x: • Responsive Stress signals:	
DAY 5 Date:	Yoga / Sitting meditation 3 Step Breathing Space: • Regular 3x: • Responsive Stress signals:	

Additional Notes: