

Meeting 7

How Can I Best Take Care of Myself?

We can try to control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe. But the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty.

This not-knowing is part of the adventure. It's also what makes us afraid. Wherever we are, we can train as a warrior. ...

In loneliness as well as in kindness, we can uncover the soft spot of basic goodness. But bodhichitta training offers no promise of happy endings. Rather, this "I" who wants to find security—who wants something to hold on to—will finally learn to grow up.

If we find ourselves in doubt that we're up to being a warrior-in-training, we can contemplate this question:

"Do I prefer to grow up and relate to life directly, or do I choose to live and die in fear?"

Pema Chödrön

Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion

This meeting is about how to use everything we have learned in our daily life and especially in difficult situations. We will surely still experience events in our life that will make us feel stressed or down. How can we handle that? How do we learn to face and deal with our own fears and feelings instead of them (unconsciously) taking control of our thoughts and behaviours? How do we train ourself to recognize complaints that are associated with stress and how do we handle these complaints? What does work for us and what doesn't work and is it subject to change/growth?

What nourishes and what drains your energy?

What we do with our time from moment to moment, from hour to hour, from year to year, can have a big impact on how we feel and on our ability to deal effectively with stress and negative feelings. We could ask ourselves the following questions:

1. What things make me feel good, reinforce the feeling that I'm really alive instead of just exist? ("N" activities)
2. What things deplete me, reduce the feeling that I'm really alive and make me feel empty, bad, like I barely exist or worse? ('D' activities)
3. Do I accept that there are certain things in my life that I simply can't change? Do I consciously spend more time and effort on activities that cheer me up and less time and effort on activities that make me feel down?



By becoming more aware of what energises us, we become more aware of what we are doing and whether or not it suits us. What makes us happy? What things make us feel good, feel like we're really alive? What things exhaust us, cost us energy and effort? In everyone's life there are things that we are less keen to do or want to have, but those are part of everyday life. How do we deal with that?

One way to get a better view of this is to write down what you do on a normal day. Then write behind each activity whether it nourishes or energises (E) or drains or depletes (D). Check out the pattern and balance between all E's and D's. What do you notice? What stimulates you, what boosts you? How do you deal with your limits and boundaries (within study, relationship, friendships)? What are your qualities and pitfalls? Finally, you can ask yourself: do I make enough time for N(ourishing) activities? How can I free up more time and space for this? And how can I spend less time and effort on the less enjoyable things? By being more present throughout the day and making informed decisions about what we really need at each of those moments, we can use activities to become more observative and alert and better regulate our mood.

This applies to both our ordinary daily lives as well as difficult periods that can sometimes escalate into depression. We can use our daily experience to discover and develop activities that we can use to better cope with periods in which we are struggling and our mood is deteriorating. If we already have these activities at our disposal and we are aware of them when we need them, we will be better able to sustain them when faced with difficulties *and our usual stress responses*. Despite negative thoughts such as: 'Why should I actually deal with this?', which are simply part of feeling down, we can still do what helps us and works well.

For example, one of the easiest ways to take care of our physical and mental well-being is to do physical exercises on a daily basis: three brisk 10-minute walks a day and other exercises, such as stretching, yoga, swimming, jogging, etc., can do our well-being a lot of good. If this practice has become daily routine, it's easier to fall back on it than we feel down.



Nourishing Healthy Seeds

Consciousness exists on two levels: as seeds and as manifestations of these seeds. Suppose we have a seed of anger in us. When conditions are favorable, that seed may manifest as a zone of energy called anger. It is burning, and it makes us suffer a lot. It is very difficult for us to be joyful at the moment the seed of anger manifests.

Every time a seed has an occasion to manifest itself, it produces new seeds of the same kind. If we are angry for five minutes, new seeds of anger are produced and deposited in the soil of our unconscious mind during those five minutes. That is why we have to be careful in selecting the kind of life we lead and the emotions we express. When I smile, the seeds of smiling and joy have come up. As long as they manifest, new seeds of smiling and joy are planted. But if I don't practice smiling for a number of years, that seed will weaken, and I may not be able to smile anymore.

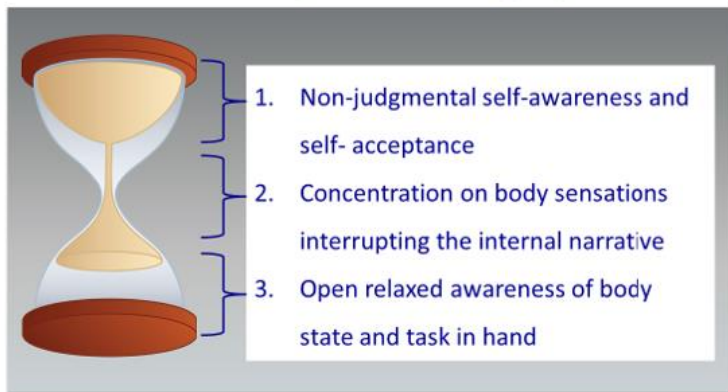
There are many kinds of seeds in us, both good and bad. Some were planted during our lifetime, and some were transmitted by our parents, our ancestors, and our society. In a tiny grain of corn, there is the knowledge, transmitted by previous generations, of how to sprout and how to make leaves, flowers, and ears of corn. Our body and our mind also have knowledge that has been transmitted by previous generations. Our ancestors and our parents have given us seeds of joy, peace, and happiness, as well as seeds of sorrow, anger, and so on.

Every time we practice mindful living, we plant healthy seeds and strengthen the healthy seeds already in us. Healthy seeds function similarly to antibodies. When a virus enters our bloodstream, our body reacts and antibodies come and surround it, take care of it, and transform it. This is true with our psychological seeds as well. If we plant wholesome, healing, refreshing seeds, they will take care of the negative seeds, even without our asking them. To succeed, we need to cultivate a good reserve of refreshing seeds.

*From: "Every step is peace"
by Thich Nhat Hanh.*



Three Step Breathing Space



(WorkplaceMT)

Awareness and acknowledgment

The breathing space is also a way to point out that we can use an activity to deal with unpleasant feelings as soon as they arise.

Awareness is the first step when we take a breathing space. The goal of this step is to use the effect of mindfulness to:

1. detach ourselves from the DOING mode;
2. shift into the experiencing/observing/knowing BEING mode;
3. acknowledging and observing our thoughts, emotions/moods and physical sensations while remaining aware of them.

Doing Mode/Being Mode

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Automatic pilot• Analysing• Striving• Seeing thoughts as solid and real• Avoidance• Mental time travel• Depleting activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conscious choice• Sensing• Accepting• Seeing thoughts as mental events• Approaching• Present moment• Nourishing activities |
|--|--|

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World,
Williams and Penman, 2011.

(WorkplaceMT, Doing Being Mode)

The breathing space and then what?

After taking a breathing space there are several possibilities. We can take several doors so to speak:



1. ***Continue with more awareness.*** After the breathing space we can continue in the (difficult) situation we were in. But with a broader perspective: a more open awareness. We may be able to feel our body and/or breath at the same time.
2. ***The body-door.*** We can also focus entirely on the physical aspect of the discomfort or stress. Where do we feel this most strongly in our body? Observing what it is that we exactly feel in our *body*. Whether thoughts, emotions or resistance are reflected somewhere in the body. Maybe we feel tension or cramping somewhere. We can stay present with this for a while. It may then help to say to yourself from time to time that it's okay that we feel or think this right now. This can help deepen acceptance. Doing this, we can also use Oxford Mindfulness Audio Sessions: Session 5 - Exploring the Difficult with Mark Williams': https://youtu.be/lwByuu_r99Y. By paying attention to our body in a caring way, and if you like to breathe at these sensations in your body, with each exhalation, you may be able to release some tension and soften your body a little. And only giving attention to the experiences and resistance is enough. Maybe it's possible to breath in a kind and loving intention into this physical experience. And release some tension and soften our body a little with each out breath. But there is no need to make an effort to relax. Turning towards the body in a caring way and focusing attention can ultimately be healing in itself. After this, we can focus on letting go of the physical sensations by focusing our attention on other aspects of our body by doing yoga or a body scan, for example.
3. ***The visualization-door.*** Do the workbench exercise 'Week 5. Approaching Difficulty': <https://www.aheadforwork.com/mp3s> investigating the situation from different perspectives. It might give us new information or insights. Or a different view of the situation or our own thoughts and feelings about it.
4. ***The thoughts-door.*** We can also focus on our thinking. Pausing at the thoughts that come to mind, without judging. With an accepting attitude, realising that our thoughts are automatic mental events and that we don't choose them to come into existence. If thoughts continue to attract our attention the exercises below can help create some space:
 - a. Write down your thoughts without thinking about it. Without using full sentences or analysing what you write, just write associatively and uncensored. Then end the writing with a point and throw away what you have written.

- b. Question your thoughts with the questions from meeting 6 'If we become aware of negative thoughts' (p. 80) to get a different view of your thoughts. (Do I confuse a thought with a fact? Do I generalize? Do I think black and white? Am I jumping to conclusions? Am I assuming what others may think or will do? Maybe I am too demanding? Towards myself or towards others? Etc.) Or is my top 5 automatic negative thoughts playing (p.91) and can I recognize them?
5. **The action-door.** After we shifted to a more open awareness in the last step of the breathing space, now may be also be an appropriate time for action. We can ask ourself: What is it I need right now? How can I best take care of myself at this time? What's wise?

When it comes to dealing with difficult feelings, the following activities can be particularly useful:

(a) Do something fun.

- *Be kind to your body.* Take a nice warm bath, take a nap, treat yourself to your favourite dish without feeling guilty. Drink your favourite drink; Give yourself a facial or do your nails.
- *Have pleasure activities.* Go for a walk (possibly with the dog or with a friend). Visit a friend, spend time with someone you like, cook food, go shopping, watch something fun or uplifting on TV, read something enjoyable, listen to music that makes you feel good.

(b). Do something that gives you satisfaction or do something you're good at.

- Clean the house; clean a cupboard or drawer; write that letter that still lies there; Do something you've put off each time, do some exercises. (It is especially important that you give yourself a compliment if you have completed a job or part of it and that you break up a task and then finish it step by step.)

(c). Do things with attention.

- Focus, with all your attention, on what you're doing, stay in the present moment, stay in the here and now. (For example: now I walk down the stairs, now I feel the handrail, now I walk into the kitchen, now I turn on the light, and so on). Be aware of your breathing while doing things, be aware of your feet making contact with the floor while walking.



Fear

The key to awakening from the bounds of fear is to move from our mental stories into immediate contact with the sensations of fear – the squeezing, pressing, burning, trembling, quaking, jittering life in our body. In fact, the story – as long as we remain awake and don't get stuck in it - can become a useful gateway to the raw fear itself.

While the mind will continue to generate stories about what we fear, we can recognize the thoughts for what they are and drop under them again and again to connect with the feelings in our body.

*Taken from: "Radical acceptance", p. 188
by Tara Brach.*

Feelings only want to be felt. Nothing else. They are not problems to be solved. Nothing needs to be done about them...

~ Christiane Michelberger



Remember!

1. View your choices and actions on 'going through' specific doors as an experiment. You don't have to decide in advance on how you will feel afterwards. Be open to noticing whether what you're doing is somehow useful to you or not.
2. When taking the action-door try various activities, do not limit yourself to a few you prefer. Sometimes trying new things can be interesting in itself. Exploring and investigating are often a counterbalance to withdrawal and isolating yourself.
3. Don't expect miracles. Try to do as best you can. It is unrealistic to expect that things will change dramatically, expecting that will only pressure you. By doing something, you will experience that you will gain a little more control over your life, so that you can better deal with mood changes and difficult situation. And take better care of yourself when this happens.

Insight

Realize, especially in times when you feel overwhelmed, that there is a solution for almost every problem. And that there are often even multiple solutions possible. Realizing this makes us strong. This way we increase our creativity and problem solving ability and take matters into our own hands.

The Dalai Lama put it this way: "There is never a reason to worry. Because there are always two possibilities. Or there's a solution to your problem and then you don't have to worry. Or there's no solution and then of course there's no point in worrying at all.' If there's a solution, you can change the situation. And if there is no solution, then there is nothing to accept the situation.

*God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.*

Reinhold Niebuhr



Nice-to-read: Martine Weber | Buddha on Worrying. Don't Worry. Be Present. (9m)
<https://medium.com/the-ascent/buddha-on-worrying-7509829c8bbe>

When stress or gloomy feelings take control

- Sometimes we feel like negative feelings just come out of nowhere. For example, we wake up exhausted and lethargic, filled with hopeless thoughts.
- It's good to realize that when something comes out of the blue in this way, it triggers negative thinking patterns for *everyone*.
- It is often the case that if we don't feel well for an unclear reason, we will automatically end up in a pattern of negative thoughts that make it worse. For example, thoughts that generalize too strongly, that predict that it will never pass again or that we're back to square one.
- Sometimes we may (constantly) wonder why we feel so bad, but this usually doesn't make us feel better and it even regularly prevents us from taking action.
- If we feel down or stressed, we can say to yourself, "just because I feel like this right now doesn't mean it will stay that way." If we have these feelings, it doesn't mean it will get worse or that it will continue. We can ask ourselves: what can I do to get through this difficult period as best I can? ("What do I need right now?" "How can I best take care of myself right now?")
- We can take a three step breathing space to (literally!) come to our senses. This allows us to see our situation from a broader perspective and become aware of the appeal of old thought patterns and of action that we can best take in this moment.

Stress prevention

Despite the skills we have now learned, it may be that certain complaints or undesirable patterns keep recurring. Feelings of stress can easily be triggered. Therefore, it is important to recognize signs of stress early, so that we can quickly apply the skills we have practiced.

Signals of stress are different for everyone. Characteristic signs have been discussed in chapters 4 and 5 and can include: being irritated quickly, feeling tired when getting up, unable to find rest, insomnia, not being able to enjoy, getting tired quickly, and feeling inadequate. What are the warning signs that signal you that stress *is building up*?

This week you will be asked to develop a 'Stress Prevention-Plan'. You can also think of it as a 'Self-Care-Plan'.

First of all, think about what is important and good for you to continue to do daily or weekly. What activities give you pleasure, relaxation, or satisfaction? What exercises do you want to continue doing? Think back to what you've learned during training and what was useful to you back then. You can take three step breathing spaces regularly, because they can lead to conscious action.

Also, consider what signals indicate that stress builds up or worsens, or that you are getting to feel more down in general. Think of what prevented you from recognizing the signals in the past and what helps you to become and stay aware of them. What can you do best when things get worse? And what better to avoid doing? Could doing the mindfulness exercises play a role in this? It can be helpful to remind ourselves of what we need in difficult times.

Also, think about whether others see it when things get worse. If so, what do they notice when your stresses or feeling down?

Goed voor
jezelf
zorgen is...



~ Elke dag balans vinden
~ Weten dat stress blijft
~ Persoonlijke en vroege stresssignalen (her)kennen



*Taking good care of yourself is ... ~ finding balance every day ~ knowing that stress will happen
~ knowing and recognizing personal and early stress signals*

Wild Geese

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

© Mary Oliver

Home practice suggestions after meeting 7

1. Develop an **exercise program** that you want to run over the next eight weeks, based on the different exercises you know now. Decide what exercises you want to do, how often and for how long. You can use the guided audio if you please. Follow your own program this week and write down your experiences in the exercise form.
2. Make a **Self-Care-Plan**. Follow the instructions from the stress prevention text on page 105 and the instructions on the pages below.
3. The **Three Step Breathing Space**:
 - Practice 3 times a day at **predetermined** times.
 - In addition, practice whenever you sense **unpleasant thoughts or feelings**, write down your experiences or problems.
 - After the three step breathing space, choose one of the five possible conscious next actions (doors) mentioned on pages 101-102 and write down your experiences in the exercise form.
4. Read the **information** belonging to meeting 7.
5. 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.

Self-Care Plan

Date:

Activities or exercises that are important to keep doing:

Describe 3 or 4 things you would like (to keep) doing on a daily base, or weekly, to ensure that daily stress doesn't build up and which will keep you in a good mood. Even if you don't feel like it, what could you do? Think of mindfulness training exercises or activities that give you pleasure, relaxation, or satisfaction. In addition, describe when and where you want to do this, possibly with whom and how.

Important activities or exercises

Signs of stress and stimuli that provoke it:

What are the main signs that stress is building up or that you are getting to feel more down in general? (e.g. irritability, being more guarded, other eating and sleeping habits, less energy, tiredness, experiencing shame and guilt, feeling hunted, hasty and rushed, feeling inferior, etc.). What kind of thoughts, emotions, physical sensations do you have and what do you (not) do when you first notice that your stress level is rising or your mood is dropping?

Important signals (e.g. being irritable, sleeping worse, worrying a lot, waking up early, etc.)

Things that worsen the mood and/or increase stress:

What things worsen your mood? These can be things that happen to you or certain thoughts, memories, worries, etc.

Important stimuli

Measures in case of deterioration of mood and/or increase of stress: what can I do myself?

What, in the past, prevented you from recognizing these signs of stress at an early stage (e.g. suppressing, ignoring, seeking distractions, arguing)? What better to avoid? How can the exercises and tips from the training help you?

What's the best message to yourself when your mood deteriorates or your stress level increases? (e.g. "I'm grateful that I now am able to notice the signals so quickly, now I can take timely action.") What has helped you in the past?

Measures I can take
Don'ts (e.g. eating a lot, lots of coffee or cigarettes, avoidance)
Do's (e.g. talking to a good friend, listening to music):

Measures in case of deterioration of mood and/or increase of stress: what can others do?

What other person or persons could notice that you are under too much stress? How can they notice this? (e.g. withdrawal, irritable) Who knows best how you and your mood are doing? What could others do (or better not do) for you at such a time?

Measures that others can take
Who?
How do they find out?
What can they do, better not do?

EXERCISE PROGRAM

Day	Date	Planned exercises	Length exercise
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

EXERCISE FORM WEEK 7

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

Day	PRACTICED YES/NO	Comments
DAY 1 Date:	Exercise Program 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive• Doors 1-5	
DAY 2 Date:	Exercise Program 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive• Doors 1-5	
DAY 3 Date:	Exercise Program 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive• Doors 1-5	
DAY 4 Date:	Exercise Program 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive• Doors 1-5	
DAY 5 Date:	Exercise Program 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular 3x:• Responsive• Doors 1-5	