

CULTIVATING
HEALTHY MIND STATES

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of mindfulness is essential to learning how to step out of old dysfunctional habits and stop suffering from dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety and addiction. By bringing an attitude of mindfulness and acceptance to the difficulties we encounter we learn to work through our resistances and truly open our hearts to what is greatest in ourselves and others.

To sustain us on a mindful path to optimal health and happiness it will be beneficial to cultivate healthy mind states such as appreciative joy, gratitude, love, compassion and enthusiasm.

What follows are suggestions and practices for how you can develop these qualities and bring them into your daily life. Don't try to do everything described below at once. Go slowly, practicing and cultivating one positive mind state at a time. Allow yourself to work with each specific practice for as many days as you need to until you feel you have achieved a comfortable (but not perfect) level of mastery.

1. MINDFULNESS

Up to this point in your psychological work you have been practicing mindfulness in order to increase the flexibility of your responses and to identify and stop old dysfunctional habits. You have learned about noticing your train of thought and bringing your attention back to your choice of focus when you are off track. The next step in your learning involves continued mindfulness practice, strengthening behaviors and activities that are expressions of your values and cultivating positive mind states.

If you have not been doing mindfulness meditations and would like an alternative approach you may find this article helpful. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-out-your-mind/201904/don-t-meditation-try-instead>

A Definition of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a mental process that includes:

1. Awareness of the present moment
2. Nonjudgmental Acceptance of experience as it arises – willingness to allow thoughts and feelings to be what they are even if they are unpleasant
3. Defusion – seeing thoughts and feelings as experiences you have in a larger field of awareness. Defusion involves developing distance and distinction from self-attacking thought; understanding and having the experience that "you" are not your thoughts and feelings. [Fusion with thoughts refers to "stuff your mind tells you that gets in the way when you get caught up in it or hooked by it."]
4. Observer self – Noticing that your thoughts and feelings come and go, but deep down the real you doesn't change. We avoid fusion with our concepts of self – who we think we are.

2. APPRECIATIVE JOY AND GRATITUDE

One source of emotional distress and suffering is the tendency to get caught up in thinking about what we don't have, but want. Some of the things we want represent true needs such as healthy food, safe and comfortable housing and adequate clothing. Lacking these necessities may entail hunger, physical discomfort or illness. The suffering of individuals confronting such challenges is real. A different type of suffering is typified by Facebook syndrome: people posting so many good and wonderful things about their lives that our lives seem dull and drab by comparison. When we start comparing ourselves and what we have with what others have we open the doors of dissatisfaction. This impulse to grasp and hold on to whatever we can may have made sense for our ancestors who lived in times of scarcity. Thanks to our ability to use language we have learned to hold on to ideas about how things should be. When we have difficulty accepting things as they are we risk dissatisfaction and emotional suffering. Mindfulness practice emphasizes willingness to allow our experience to be as it is whether it is pleasant or not. Acceptance is a very valuable skill, yet our development as wholesome human beings requires that we cultivate additional responses.

Gratitude
Thankfulness
Appreciation

Gratitude is a primary healthy mind state. Appreciation of the mind-body which we often call the "self" is one healthy starting point. It helps us focus on what is good and wholesome instead of what is wrong with life. Appreciation and expressing gratitude for what we have been given –by the world or others- initiates a relational process that is essential for building healthy ties with our family, friends, community and the environment.

Here are several strategies you can employ to cultivate gratitude.

- a. The Pleasant Events exercise. Every day do your best to notice at least one pleasant event. Notice how the body feels, what emotions arise, and what thoughts go through your head as you experience pleasantness. Cultivate the appreciation of small, mundane things like seeing a bird outside your window, eating a delicious snack, spending time with a friend. Extend this practice by asking yourself once a day, "what am I grateful for right now?" Spend some time noticing and enjoying the feeling of gratitude. This exercise is an extension of the Pleasant Events Calendar which you will find in the Mindfulness Therapy Manual, week 2.

A variation of this exercise is to write down two or three good things that happen each day. Then answer these questions (based on an exercise by Martin Seligman in his book *Thrive*).

How did this happen?

What does it mean to me?

What can I do to make it happen in the future?

- b. Awakening to the World exercise. Practice mindfulness of waking up. In the morning before you open your eyes bring awareness to the breath. Is it possible to open to a sense of gratitude or appreciation for the simple act of breathing? If so say a few words of gratitude or appreciation.
- Opening the eyes – appreciation for seeing
 - Stretching – appreciation for the ability to move the body.
 - Sitting up and standing up – appreciation for the ability to stand and balance.
 - Walking –
 - Going to the bathroom gratitude for a body which is functioning
 - Getting dressed – appreciation for clothing, those who made it, transported it and sold it.
 - Eating – appreciation for the working of the mouth, the ability to taste and reduce food to a digestible consistency.
 - Thinking – appreciation for the ability to see, hear and appreciate language, to compare, analyze, solve problems, be creative.
 - Good fortune: appreciation for what you do have in your current situation. Include materials things, activities, relationships of all kinds, your skills, your strengths, your inner resources. If this is hard begin with thinking about all the things you have learned since you were a child: how to eat, walk, talk, cross the street, ride a bike, play catch, how to play games, write, do basic math, how to do various jobs you have held.
- c. Appreciating the good fortune of others. Begin with thinking about someone you care about strongly. Practice cultivating appreciation and gratitude for their good fortune. Even when thinking of those who have been through rough times, try to think of how they made it through, perhaps with the help of other family members, friends, or community support. Express gratitude and appreciation that you and others are part of their life. After practicing for a few days begin to extend this practice to others who are well known to you, but not your closest friends or family. Next, expand the practice to people who you may see from time to time, but who you don't really know, e.g. the cashier at the supermarket, or the people see on the train commuting to work each day.

You can practice appreciation of others during your day to day interactions. Try the following exercise (based on an exercise by Martin Seligman in his book *Thrive*).

When you hear someone talk about something good that happened to them respond in a positive, active, supportive, and constructive way.

Ask them for more information.

Find out how it happened.

What does it mean to the other person?

Let them know that you also think it is great.

- d. Gratitude for your community. Bring to mind the place where you live. Begin by thinking about the home in which you live. Consider all of the possessions which you own, picturing

the contents of each room. Consider all of the utilities which connect you to the larger community - water, electricity, gas, oil, phone, internet – and how these affect your life. Consider your neighborhood with all of its roads, sewers, parks, streams, ponds, lakes, stores, hospitals municipal services. Imagine all of the people who work to make your community a safe, livable place for you. Consider what your life might be like if you had none of this.

3. LOVE

We are often caught up in cycles of anger, criticism, jealousy, envy or dissatisfaction. Cultivating positive mind states such as love is an alternative. Cultivating an attitude of love is quite different than the feeling of romantic love. Love refers to an attitude of caring, openness and



generosity towards self and others. It means that we deliberately cultivate an awareness that we are all human, made of the same stuff, feeling the same feelings, and expressing ourselves in unique ways. We cultivate an awareness of our interconnectedness and interdependence. That awareness brings us closer to others, more willing to accept self and others as ultimately imperfect, mortal beings who all need and want love and understanding.

I have often heard it said that it is difficult to love others until one develops love for self. Lack of self love may be a problem because of feelings of shame, guilt or inadequacy. The human mind, with its incessant tendency to compare, contrast and analyze may unfortunately turn its sharp tools of language on itself coming up with a negative evaluation. Criticism from other or simply experiencing the inevitable short coming we all experience can intensify this negative pattern.

Often the first step towards self love is an acknowledgement that these patterns exist, just noticing what is there. Labelling these negative thoughts can be helpful in gaining some distance from them. Use whatever phrase works for you. Some examples: 'There's negativity again.' 'There is judgment.' 'There's that Negative Thought Train I get on.' We use labels and metaphors like the Passenger's on the Bus to help us decrease the extent to which we 'buy into' or are 'fused' with our thoughts.

A wonderful follow up to distancing from negative thoughts is to have an aspiration practice focused on self love. Some possible aspirations are

May I be filled with love.

May I care for myself.

May I learn to care for and love myself.

These aspirations indicate a desire to care for and be kind to one's self. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for these aspirations to trigger opposing thoughts. If this happens we return to labelling those thoughts, identifying them as dissatisfaction or suffering, and acknowledging them as thoughts, not as facts. Aspirations are not facts, they are expressions of hope meant to inspire us to positive action.

The next step in self love is making sure that you frequently remember to do something kind for yourself. This might be something as simple as remembering to do a mindfulness practice, choosing a healthy food over junk food, or choosing self compassion over frustration, anxiety or rumination.

Love for others follows a similar path. Practice noticing when judgments and stories about others arise in the mind. Label these thoughts as judgments, grudges, resentment, gossip or other appropriate label. Recall our common humanity. We are all imperfect human beings who struggle with our own past, fears, hurts and limitations. Consider ways that you can be more loving or friendly towards those in your world through acts of loving kindness, generosity, kind speech, self-restraint, listening deeply and carefully when spoken to, loyalty, gratitude, sympathetic joy and similar actions.

4. COMPASSION

Some definitions

Compassion:

"The wish that all sentient beings may be free from suffering."

Dalai Lama

"Deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and other living beings, coupled with the wish and effort to alleviate it."

Paul Gilbert, PhD

Compassion
For
Self &
Others

Self-Compassion

"When we suffer, caring for ourselves as we would care for someone we truly love. Self-compassion includes self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness."

Kristin Neff, PhD

The definition of self-compassion given by Kristen Neff contains several important elements. Kindness towards self and others is rooted in a deeper sense of love and caring. The neuro-psychological roots of compassion are found in the para-sympathetic nervous system which calms and soothes the body. This system is activated in infants when they are rocked and calmed in their parent's arms.

This sense of love and caring comes naturally to many people, especially when they have grown up in an environment in which they received these beautiful gifts. Others who may have grown up in harsher circumstances may have to work a bit harder to find feelings of love and caring. Most people are able to identify some figure – a parent, relative, teacher, mentor, supervisor or friend who has shown them some kindness. Everyone can nurture kindness by beginning with nurturing gratitude and acknowledging the many small gifts we receive each day that are simply part of being alive. Gratitude is one way of opening the heart to self and others. When the open heart perceives suffering a natural desire to relieve that suffering arises.

The sense of common humanity refers to the awareness that we are not alone in our suffering. Everyone is subject to dissatisfaction, illness, aging and ultimately death. You are not alone or unique in suffering. All humans suffer at some point in their lives.

When we mindfully acknowledge our common humanity in the presence of suffering and meet that acknowledgment with kindness there is a sense of consolation which arises that we call compassion.

There are many exercises to develop compassion and self-compassion. These exercises are derived from the work of Dr. Kristen Neff and from sources in the Buddhist tradition.

Instructions for some of the exercises will be found below the following list, others in a separate file.

- a. Mindfulness practice that brings awareness to the body: eating, walking, breathing.
- b. Affectionate breathing for self compassion
- c. Soothing touch
- d. Compassionate movement
- e. Self-compassion Break: acknowledging suffering is present, acknowledging you are not alone (common humanity), aspiration to be kind to yourself.
- f. RAIN -Meeting difficult emotions – working with acceptance practices.
- g. Loving-kindness Meditation for Beginners
- h. Loving-kindness for a loved one
- i. Giving and receiving compassion
- j. Compassionate listening
- k. Forgiveness practices

If you would like to learn more about compassion and self-compassion the following books may be helpful.

Germer, C. K. (2009) *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*. New York: Guilford Press

Neff, K. D. (2011) *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York: William Morrow.

SELF-COMPASSION BREAK [Kristen Neff, PHD]

When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now say to yourself, slowly:

1. **"This is a moment of suffering"**

That's mindfulness. Other options include: *This hurts. This is stressful.*

2. **"Suffering is a part of life."**

That's common humanity. Other options include.

- *I'm not alone,*
- *We all struggle in our lives.*
- *This is how it feels when a person struggles in this way*

3. **"May I be kind to myself"**

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch to your hands.

See if you can find words for what *you need* in times-like this.

Other options may be:

- *May I accept myself as I am.*
- *May I give myself the compassion that I need.*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am.*
- *May I forgive myself.*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be safe.*

If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? If your friend would leave with just a few words in mind, what would you like those words to be? What message would you like to deliver, heart to heart?

Now see if you can offer the same message to yourself.

AFFECTIONATE BREATHING

- Please find a friendly, comfortable posture in which your body is supported and you don't need any effort to remain in that position for the entire meditation.
- Take a few slow, easy breaths to release unnecessary tension, letting the eyes close partially or fully. Placing a hand over the heart (or anywhere it is soothing) as a reminder to bring affectionate awareness to our experience and to ourselves.
- Now finding your breath, wherever you can feel it most easily. Perhaps at the tip of the nose, the belly, or perhaps as a gentle movement of your whole body? Letting yourself notice the simple sensation of breathing. Just feeling your breath for a while.
- Letting yourself incline inwardly toward your breathing as you might incline toward a child or a beloved pet, with curiosity and tenderness.
- Don't worry about how often your mind wanders. When your mind wanders, gently escorting it back to the sensation of breathing like redirecting a puppy or a child who has wandered off.
- Noticing how your breath nourishes your body even when you're not paying any attention to it. Letting your body *breathe you*. There is nothing you need to do.
- Feeling your *whole* body breathe, gently moving with the rising and falling of the breath, like the movement of the sea or the rocking of an infant.
- Allowing your body to be rocked and caressed - internally caressed - by the breath.
- Perhaps giving yourself over to the breath, *becoming* the breath.
- And now, releasing the breath, and allowing everything that comes to awareness to be just as it is, just for now.
- Slowly and gently open your eyes.

SOOTHING TOUCH

One easy way to soothe and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is to give yourself a gentle hug or caress, or simply put your hand on your heart and feel the warmth of your hand. It may feel awkward or embarrassing at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being cuddled in its mother's arms. Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ. Research indicates that physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it?

You might like to try putting your hand over your heart during difficult periods several times a day for a period of at least a week.

Hand-an-Heart

- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place *both* hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of your hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where on your body a gentle touch is actually soothing. Some other possibilities are:

- One hand on your cheek
- Cradling your face in your hands
- Gently stroking your arms
- Crossing your arms and giving a gentle squeeze
- Gently rubbing your chest, or using circular movements
- Hand on your abdomen
- One hand on your abdomen and one over heart
- Cupping one hand in the other in your lap

Hopefully you'll start to develop the habit of physically comforting yourself when needed, taking full advantage of this surprisingly simple and straightforward way to be kind to ourselves.

RAIN

The RAIN technique provides you with a model for how to skillfully relate to unpleasant experiences. Each letter of the word stands for one thing to do. For a fuller discussion of RAIN see the books by Sharon Salzberg (*Real Love*) and Jack Kornfield (*A Path with Heart* or *The Wise Heart*). You can also utilize other similar techniques you have learned such as the 3-Minute Breathing Space or Stop-Look-Listen.

R: RECOGNIZE. Check in and notice what is arising in the present moment.

A: ACKNOWLEDGE. Allowing your experience to be whatever it is. Noticing any judgments may arise. You may use labels to describe the experience or simply acknowledge the feeling as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

I: INVESTIGATE. Bringing curiosity to your experience and exploring it in some depth. Noticing the qualities of your sensations, feelings and thoughts. Noticing familiar patterns of negativity, fear or avoidance. Noticing how these experiences may change from moment to moment or that they have layers of depth that may change as well.

N: NON-IDENTIFY. We avoid getting hooked by our thoughts and feelings. Rather than saying “I am angry” or “I am anxious,” we simply notice that here is anger here is anxiety.

OR

N-NURTURE. Nurture yourself using any of the techniques for self-soothing or self-compassion.

5. ENTHUSIASM

The energy of enthusiasm and zeal derives ultimately from a love of life and is expressed most importantly as deeds of loving kindness. Constructive enthusiasm and zeal represent the living and acting out of one's love and values in the context of family and community.

Enthusiasm
Zeal
Carpe Diem
Seize the Day

Enthusiasm is a positive, energized self-assertion, the ability to live with happiness, zeal and integrity. When properly cultivated, the energized engagement of enthusiasm transforms an individual into a leader. However, expressing too much of this energy may result in overwhelming or dominating others. Without the balancing energy of dignity and humility enthusiasm may become expressed as the willfulness of rebellion or addiction.

The effort we put into developing constructive enthusiasm then is to learn how we can be who we truly want to be. It is learning how to overcome our negative character traits and weaknesses. Bringing the energy of enthusiasm into our lives is a task that will require a great deal of work. Often our resolve to do better is frustrated when our efforts fall short of our goal. We know what we would like to do, but somehow we cannot get around to doing it. Obstacles to change abound whether our goal is simple or complex,

One of the most formidable challenges we face is the fact that much of what we do each day is quite automatic. Things that we once struggled to do, walking driving, brushing our teeth, or riding a bicycle eventually become automatic. The advantage of automatic behavior is precisely that it requires little thought. The disadvantage is that it is very hard to change. Becoming aware of automatic behaviors and patterns is the first step towards change. Bringing awareness to all of your behavior and speech provides opportunities to notice what you are doing and then to make conscious choices and changes in behavior that are in line with your values.

An important question to ask is if we are living lives filled with acts of loving kindness, and compassion towards ourselves, our families and our world. Enthusiasm acknowledges our full ability to join with others and to lead and teach others. It represents the ability to exert authority within appropriate limits. Without being balanced by humility, enthusiasm can grow into demagoguery or bullying.

Practices that help to develop *Enthusiasm* include:

1. Daily prayer or affirmation of core values and commitments
2. Practicing a repertoire of positive personal actions including doing favors for others, and expressing love by doing random acts of loving kindness . Other kind acts of enthusiasm include
 - greeting others with a smile and a gracious greeting,
 - holding a door for someone,
 - commenting on something positive or complementing someone,
 - always saying ‘thank you,’
 - giving others your full attention and eye contact when they are speaking
 - call someone who you have not heard from recently
3. Couple your enthusiasm with a positive intention. This could be as simple as the idea that you are bringing some light into someone’s life and the world.
4. Mental rehearsal of positive behavior which you have found lacking in yourself or difficult to do.

Enthusiasm meditation

To receive optimal benefit from this meditation please follow these instructions:

- Find a quiet space to sit where you will be undisturbed for 5 to 10 minutes.
- Sit comfortably and begin by focusing your awareness on your breath. Breathe out slowly three times making your exhalation just a bit longer than your inhalation.
- Read through the mediation two or three times and then allow yourself to enter into the imagery. Picture the scenes described in as much detail as possible, placing yourself fully into the scene being described. If you are someone who does not easily generate mental imagery, don't worry. Just do the best you can and allow your thoughts to guide you.

Meditation: In your mind’s eye picture someone who you imagine embodies enthusiasm. It could be a biblical figure, a sports figure, a movie character, a teacher or someone else you know personally. Notice what that person is like in their most enthusiastic moments. Breathe in their enthusiasm. See yourself embodying all of that enthusiasm.

Then see yourself confronting your greatest obstacle, expressing your doubts, and drawing on your loyalty to your values to overcome that obstacle in a kind, joyful and enthusiastic way. See yourself exercising the *self-leadership* that is required for you to become the person who is the highest expression of your love and values.

6. MAKING THE TRANSITION

How do we make the transition from feeling angry, anxious, sad, over whelmed or any other negative state to a positive mood state? Sometimes we are so hooked or immersed in our funk that it seems there is no way out, there the positive mind states that we have worked so hard to cultivate

The first step in making the transition is *always* a mindful pause, simply realizing that we are stuck. In the pause you pay attention to the sensations or feelings, noticing you're your experience is. Use the 3-Minute Breath Space exercise or Stop-Look-Listen exercise. Explore if it possible to move from being immersed in the thoughts or feelings to simply seeing them as transitory sensory experiences.

Once you have completed the mindful pause it is then possible to make the transition, but sometimes we need to do a bit more work to move into a more flexible place. There are several approaches you can experiment with.

1. Change your posture. Move into a posture that is more upright, alert, balanced and relaxed.
2. Change your breathing. Experiment with making your breath slower, faster, deeper, shallower. See what helps.
3. Move your body, shake your arms and legs, shake the tension out of the body, then do some gentle movement to help settle down and relax. Mindful walking or t'ai chi are possibly helpful.
4. Change your behavior or activity. Do something that you find pleasurable, engaging and that is consistent with your values and goals.
5. Review you Valued Direction Worksheet and/or your Mission Statement.
6. Practice one of the basic Positive Mind State exercises.
7. Imagery exercise. Sitting in a comfortable position with eyes closed bring awareness to the breath and breath out three times allowing each exhalation to be slightly longer than each inhalation. Picture your self noticing and responding to the stress mindfully and using the suggestions above. Rehearse in some details how you will respond. Breath out three more times and open your eyes.