

Session 1

The Automatic Pilot

Foreword

Mindfulness is the willingness to be present with all experiences, whether pleasant or unpleasant, with kindness and curiosity. When unpleasant thoughts or emotions arise—such as stress or restlessness—we often tend to reject or suppress them.

Mindfulness teaches you to adopt a more accepting attitude toward thoughts, emotions, and the body. You learn to be more consciously aware of the present moment experience without judging it. This can create space for greater freedom of choice and may lead to an improved quality of life.

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training is designed to help you relate differently to stress. Research now shows that mindfulness training is also effective for depression and other psychological and physical complaints.

In this training, you will learn to relate differently to your thoughts, emotions, and physical discomfort. You may learn to observe your thoughts and emotions with more distance, making it easier not to identify with them. You'll also be invited to pay more attention to what is happening in your body. That requires practice, which is why you'll receive exercises after each session. It's important to make time and space for this. Although it's often not easy to give yourself this time, practicing regularly increases the likelihood of new experiences.

Throughout the training, you'll learn to recognize automatic reactions and practice shifting toward more conscious responses. You'll do this by repeatedly pausing to observe what is going on inside. We ask for your patience and encourage you to practice regularly.

The training consists of eight sessions. After each session, you can review the main themes and complete exercises in this workbook. We expressly encourage you not to read ahead but to go through the workbook one session at a time. Use the workbook to record your experiences with the exercises so you can reflect on them in the next session.

We wish you a meaningful and enriching training.

This workbook is an adapted version of the original English-language MBSR training developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, integrated with elements from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale.

Radboudumc Centre for Mindfulness

Becoming Aware of the Automatic Pilot

Introduction to Session 1

Have you ever found yourself walking down the street while your mind was completely elsewhere? You might be making a grocery list or fantasize about your next vacation. It's easy to walk for minutes on end on 'autopilot,' without being present with your attention.

In many moments of our lives, we're not truly aware of what we're doing. Our mind is preoccupied with future or past events. Memories, daydreams, worries, or fantasies take us out of the present moment.

A conversation goes in one ear and out the other, a play your daughter performs doesn't truly register, and that vacation seemed to fly by. We miss these events because we react from autopilot without knowing it.

The autopilot can be useful—it helps us get from A to B while coming up with a brilliant idea. But we often don't realize that when we react from this mode, we tend to activate old patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. These are often unhelpful and may lead to agitation, a bad feeling about yourself, or friction in relationships—especially if you're someone who sees 'trouble ahead' easily.

The goal of this training is to help you become more aware of your thoughts, feelings, and body moment by moment, so you can respond to a situation from choice instead of old habits and patterns.

Attention is the key. In the coming weeks, you'll practice noticing where your attention is throughout the day. You'll use exercises like the body scan, mindful movement, and sitting meditation. You'll also practice everyday tasks mindfully, like eating or walking.

We often say: at the gym you train your muscles—at a mindfulness course you train your attention. Not to walk mindfully for hours, but to become a little more aware of what's going on inside and around you, so you can respond more consciously.

Mindfulness and Stress

We all go through life experiencing highs and lows in mood and energy. One moment we may feel content and relaxed, and the next moment we feel stressed: there's too much to do and not enough time, things aren't going the way we want, or we compare ourselves to others and feel disappointed. Before we know it, we start feeling physically tense too. And then other challenges may come up. For instance, you may feel exhausted but not refreshed after a long night's sleep, leading to sluggishness or low mood. This may trigger worrying: How did this happen? What went wrong?

Usually, this downward spiral ends by itself. But sometimes, we can sink into a slump that lasts for days.

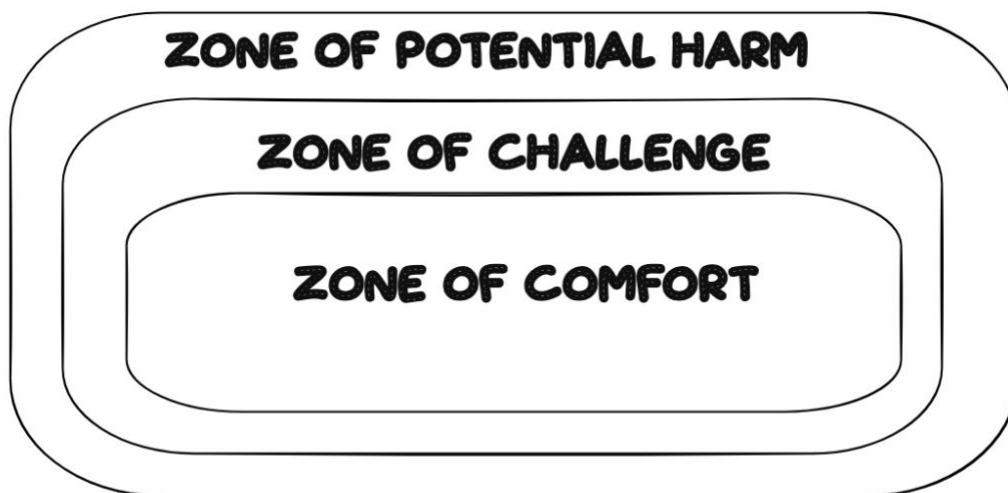
In this training, you'll learn new ways to relate to your thoughts and emotions. There is an alternative to the constant struggle we have with the difficult things in life. We'll practice being with challenging thoughts and emotions in a different way. You might discover how to be more at ease with discomfort.

Everyone experiences physical discomfort from time to time—headaches, back pain, or fatigue. When these symptoms persist, they can greatly impact your daily life. The causes can be numerous, and often multiple factors are at play. Sometimes there is an underlying medical condition. There may also be a connection to stressful life circumstances. Even after a stressful period ends, tension can linger in the body.

Sometimes there's no clear explanation for your symptoms. You may be concerned about what's going on. Both the symptoms themselves and the thoughts about them can affect your mood. Whatever the reason, learning how to deal with them appropriately is a skill. It's important to listen to your body's signals and respect your limits. At the same time, it's important not to let the symptoms dictate everything. You are more than your symptoms.

In this training, you'll be invited to treat your body with kindness. Even when it's tense or in pain, your body deserves caring attention.

You will also practice gently exploring your physical boundaries and observe the effects. This can help you relate to pain and discomfort in a more balanced way.



Zones of Comfort and Challenge

The innermost zone is likely where you are now. Feeling comfortable is of course relative, but chances are you feel fairly safe in this zone. Mindfulness invites you to also enter the second zone. This is the zone where you can experiment, test your boundaries, and perhaps expand your capacity to experience or manage things. The outermost zone is where you overextend yourself—experimenting here may do more harm than good. It is not the intention in this mindfulness training to place yourself in this outer zone.

The Importance of Practice

Together we will explore how to change automatic patterns that may have been in place for a long time. They might have become habits. These can only change with time and effort. The success of the mindfulness training depends on your willingness to practice at home. This includes daily practice with the audio recordings. It's not always easy to make time when your schedule is already full. So make a real commitment now to keep this up for the next eight weeks. Choose a place and time that work for you.

Facing Difficulties

Through the sessions and the home practice, you may learn to become more aware of each moment in your life. The good news is that life becomes more vivid and satisfying. On the other hand, this also means facing unpleasant or difficult experiences. Hopefully, you'll discover that it's possible to allow these things to be, that they won't overwhelm you, and that they may not be as difficult as they initially seemed. In the training, you'll also learn to treat yourself with more kindness—because we often make things harder for ourselves by being overly critical.

Patience and Perseverance

Changing ingrained habits requires insight, but also practice. The results of your efforts may not appear right away. It's a bit like gardening. First, you prepare the soil, plant seeds, make

sure they get enough water and nutrients, and then you wait patiently. This training asks the same of you: patience and perseverance. Usually, it takes a few weeks before you start to notice changes and experience the results of your practice!

Pillar of Mindfulness Practice: ‘Non-Judging’

You cultivate awareness by adopting the attitude of an impartial witness to your own experience. This requires becoming aware of the constant stream of judgments and reactions to internal and external experiences that we are usually caught up in—and learning to step back from them.

When we begin paying attention to our own mental activity, we’re often surprised to find that we are constantly evaluating our experiences. The mind categorizes almost everything. We judge everything in terms of what we believe its value is to us. Some things, people, or events are labeled ‘good’ because they make us feel good in some way. Others are quickly judged as ‘bad’ because they make us feel unpleasant. The rest are categorized as ‘neutral’—we think they don’t really matter.

Neutral things, people, and events are often completely ignored. We find them so dull that we prefer not to give them any attention at all.

This habit of categorizing and judging our experiences keeps us stuck in automatic reactions we are barely aware of—and which often have no objective basis. These judgments dominate our thinking, making it difficult to find inner peace. The mind becomes like a yo-yo, swinging up and down all day on the string of judging thoughts.

If you’re unsure about this, just spend ten minutes observing your mind during your normal activities and see how often you’re taken over by judgment—‘this is pleasant,’ ‘this is unpleasant.’ To discover a more effective way of dealing with stress, the first step is to become aware of these automatic judgments. Only then can we begin to look through our own biases and fears and free ourselves from their tyranny.

It’s important to recognize when this judging function of the mind appears and then intentionally adopt the stance of a nonjudging witness. Remind yourself that all you need to do is observe. If you notice judging thoughts, you don’t have to stop them—just be aware of them. Don’t judge your judgments and make things more complicated.

For example, say you’re focusing on your breath. At some point, your mind may say, ‘This is boring,’ or ‘This isn’t working,’ or ‘I can’t do this.’ These are judgments. When they arise, it’s essential to recognize them and remember that mindfulness practice means suspending judgment and simply observing whatever arises—including judging thoughts—without elaborating on them or letting them guide you. Then, return to observing your breath.

Adapted from: Kabat-Zinn, J. (2014). In his book 'Full Catastrophe Living,' Jon Kabat-Zinn describes seven pillars of mindfulness. Each week, one pillar will receive special attention.

Practice After Session 1

1. Practice the Body Scan

Practice the body scan six times a week using the audio recording.

Don't expect anything special to happen. Let go of expectations and remain curious about whatever you experience. Do not judge your experience—just do the exercise. During the next session, there will be time to share your experiences.

Make brief notes on the observation form. Also write down any questions or notable experiences so you can refer to them in the next meeting.

2. Do One Daily Routine with Attention

Choose one daily task and try to be aware of it from moment to moment each time you do it.

Examples: brushing your teeth, showering, drying off, getting dressed, eating, doing groceries, etc. This does not mean the activity needs to take longer than usual.

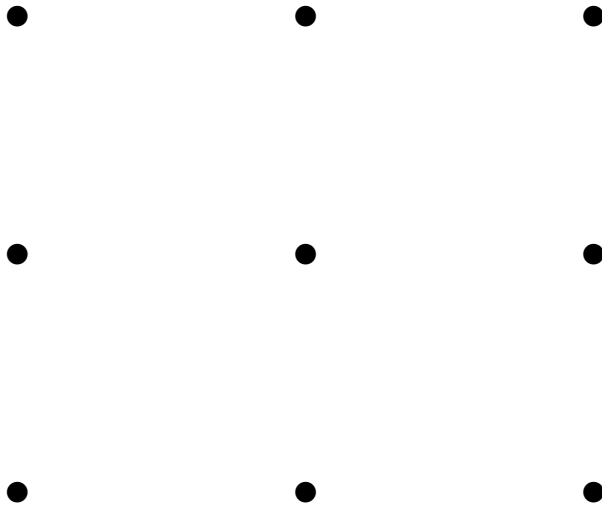
3. Eat with Attention

Every day this week, eat the first bite of one meal with full attention.

4. Do the Nine-Dot Exercise

Nine-Dot Exercise

Connect all 9 dots using four straight lines without lifting your pen from the paper.



Practice Log – Session 1

Each time you practice, write it down here. Make notes about anything that comes up during the practice so we can discuss it during the next session.

Day/Date	Exercise	Experiences
Day 1 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	
Day 2 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	
Day 3 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	
Day 4 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	
Day 5 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	
Day 6 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	
Day 7 Date:	Body Scan Routine Activity with Attention Eating with Attention	

Space for Additional Notes