

Session 4

Staying present and allowing what is

Introduction to Session 4

We all experience unpleasant things from time to time. Sometimes they are small things like an annoying argument, or you just miss the train you needed to catch. Sometimes serious matters are going on, such as an illness affecting yourself or a loved one, or the end of a relationship. Difficult things are simply part of life. The way you deal with those things determines whether they will control your life or whether you can handle them with a bit more ease.

By becoming aware of the thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations that arise during events in your daily life, you get the opportunity to respond to them more consciously and effectively. In this way, you can potentially stop and change your usual, automatic reactions.

In general, we react to experiences in one of the following three ways.

We are absent or bored and switch from the present moment to other things in our head. For example, during a boring meeting, thoughts wander to what you are going to do next weekend.

We want to hold onto things, do not allow ourselves to let go of the experience of that moment, or want to experience something we are not experiencing now. For example, you are enjoying sitting on an outdoor terrace in the sun and you wish life was always like this, that you would always feel this way. Or you have an injury to your foot, and you just cannot let go of the fact that this had to happen just before that important running race. If only i were fit, you keep thinking.

We want an experience to go away, are angry with it, want to get rid of the experience we have now, or want to avoid things we do not wish for in the future. For example, you said something mean, and you feel ashamed. You do not want to feel this way. 'How could i ever have said that', you might think. Judging thoughts and accompanying feelings can dominate your mind.

During the coming sessions, we will reflect on this even more. These ways of reacting can cause problems, especially the tendency to react with aversion to unpleasant feelings. What we are going to practice is becoming aware of your experience in the moment, so that you can respond to it with mindfulness instead of automatically.

The practice of sitting in awareness can help you with this. During sitting, you can kindly notice when you wander away from the current moment, for example due to a thought that catches your attention, a certain feeling in your body, a mood or something from outside yourself, a sound for instance. Then you bring the attention to the awareness of the here and now. At other times of the day, you can use the breathing space exercise when you notice unpleasant feelings or a sense of tension in the body. This allows you to respond consciously and not automatically.

Staying present

Your body can help you develop more awareness. This can be done, for example, by paying attention to your posture. You are probably sitting as you read this. What can you notice in your body right now? Perhaps you feel the contact with the chair, or you feel your feet resting on the floor. It is also possible that you are aware of the movement of the breath, or something else in your body. Consciously feeling the sensations in your body.

Transitions from one activity to another also lend themselves to practice: a moment to be present in the body with awareness once again. When you finish reading and stand up, feel the movements of standing up, of walking to your next activity. Perhaps you can also notice how it feels in the body when you lie down at the end of the day. By being present in the body throughout the day, you are less likely to be completely consumed by thoughts.

Practice patiently with feeling what is there, the body is always there. Even the smallest movements you make are meaningful to notice. You do not need to do anything extra. If you are reaching for something and you do so with awareness, you are already doing it. Simply notice that you are picking something up. You are moving. By paying attention to your body, you can train yourself to be present in the moment.

It is very simple. Practice again and again to observe your bodily sensations. Paradoxical as it may sound, it might seem like an effort, but returning to the present moment time and again has a relaxing effect. It enables us not only to be consciously present during meditation, but to live mindfully much more often.

Taking some distance from your thoughts

It can be incredibly liberating when you see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not yourself or reality. Perhaps you think that you have to do a certain number of things today. You do not recognize it as a thought, but act as if it is the truth, and with that you have created a reality at that moment that you truly believe in: all those things really must be done today.

Peter, who had suffered a heart attack and wanted to prevent a possible next heart attack, was washing his car on the driveway at 10 o'clock in the evening with the garden lights on. Suddenly he came to a profound discovery. He realized that he did not have to do this right now at all! His behaviour was the inevitable consequence of the fact that he had been trying all day to get the things he had planned done that very same day. When he noticed what he was doing to himself, he understood that he had been so convinced that everything had to be done that day, that he had not doubted whether that was actually true.

If you yourself are busy in such a way, you might also feel rushed, tense and worried without knowing why. You will probably also think about all the things you still have to do during the meditation exercises from time to time.

Notice then that it is just a thought. It is merely a thought about what still needs to be done: 'planning.' And then return with your attention to this moment.

When you can look at these thoughts with some distance, you might also start to see more clearly what is truly relevant. This can help you to prioritize certain things and make wise decisions about what really needs to happen. You will probably sense better throughout the day when it is time to stop. Simply recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from an illusionary reality. It gives you a clearer view, and your life will be less determined by your thoughts.

This liberation from the power of thoughts is a consequence of meditating. When you spend some time every day with non-doing, with feeling the breath and the body, and noticing the activity of the mind without identifying with it, gradually more calmness and mindfulness will come into your life.

Because the mind becomes more stable and concerns itself less with the content of thinking, you strengthen the mind's ability to concentrate and be calm. Every time you recognize an arising thought as a thought, register its content and perhaps notice how strongly it affects you, and then redirect your attention to your breath and your body,

you strengthen your mindfulness. You get to know yourself a little better every time. Ultimately, this helps to accept yourself more as you truly are, without thinking that you should be different.

The sequence of thoughts and associations

Thinking dominates our lives. Consciously or unconsciously, you spend a very large part of your life engaged with the content of your thoughts. Meditation is a different process; it is not about reasoning or pondering. Through the process of observing, by not engaging with the content of thoughts, new insights can arise. We do not have to fight or struggle with our thoughts or judge our thoughts. When we notice a thought arising, we can simply choose not to follow it.

When we lose ourselves in a thought, we identify with it to a high degree. Thoughts race through our minds and we are swept away by them, which can take us very far in a short amount of time. We hop onto a train of thoughts that are linked together without realizing we have done so, let alone knowing where we are heading. Somewhere along the way we (hopefully) wake up and realize that we are thinking, that we have been taken for a ride, or rather, that our mind has run away with us. And when we get off, it can be in a completely different mood than when we got on.

Now take a moment to look at the thoughts arising in you right now. As an exercise, you could close your eyes now and imagine sitting in a cinema, looking at an empty screen. Just wait for thoughts to appear. What kind of thoughts are they exactly? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magical shows that seem real when we are absorbed in them, but disappear when we look at them consciously.

And what about those intense thoughts that affect us? We look, look and look again, and then very suddenly, oops, we are gone and absorbed in thought. What exactly happens? Often there are certain states of mind or specific thoughts that catch us in their grip again and again, so that we forget they are merely illusionary realities. It is amazing to see how much power we unconsciously attribute to some thoughts. "do this", "say that", "remember", "make plans", "get obsessed", "judge". They can drive us crazy!

The kind of thoughts we have and the influence these thoughts have on our lives depends on whether we are aware of them. If you are in a clear state where you limit yourself to seeing thoughts arise and disappear again, it does not matter what kind of thoughts you have. You see your thoughts as they are: a passing show.

Thoughts lead to actions and actions have all kinds of consequences. In which thoughts are we going to invest? Our most important task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which thoughts we take action on and which we leave for what they are.

What is stress?

Stress is the response of our entire organism, our body and our mind, to the stressors we experience. We speak of a stress experience when we feel that more is being demanded of us than we can handle.

A stressor, that which causes stress, can be both an internal and an external event. For instance, a thought or a feeling can evoke stress. Such as the memory of an unpleasant event that evokes anger and tension, or simply the thought of being ill, which can already evoke severe anxiety. External events that evoke tension and stress responses, and which we all know to a greater or lesser extent, are a loud noise, a computer that does not work, a long queue at the checkout, deadlines at work, the loss of a loved one, financial problems, an overloaded workday, or caring for a parent with dementia alongside a job and family.

It is good to realize that a certain amount of stress is part of life. Otherwise we would not get moving.

Our system naturally tends to restore the imbalance caused by stress. From our distant ancestors we learned to react to stress by fighting, fleeing or freezing. For example, fleeing can be appropriate when you are being chased by a wild bear, or fighting when someone from another tribe runs off with your wife.

In truly threatening situations, these automatic and usually unconscious reactions can certainly help us survive. However, for the kind of life that we as 21st-century people have developed, these unconscious reactions are often far from adequate. And certainly not when it comes to emotions such as fear or sadness.

Experiencing too much stress will cause alarm reactions in our body and mind, because since the earliest evolution our body-mind system registers too much stress as a threat.

Physical stress reactions can manifest themselves, among other things, in the form of palpitations, sweating, insomnia, muscle tension, stomach pain, increased blood pressure or dilation of the pupils.

Psychologically, we can experience too much stress in the form of anxiety, or we might be easily irritable or become angry. Strong emotions such as mortal terror, rage, grief and anger can also be the result of stress.

Research has shown that the extent to which we feel whether we are in control of our lives influences the experience of psychological stress.

We also know a number of cognitive stress reactions, such as racing thoughts, worrying and brooding, and unstoppable critical thoughts about ourselves. Continuing to work endlessly can also be a stress reaction because we feel the work must be finished or because it is never good enough.

Stress also refers to the fact that we are constantly confronted with the need to adapt to all the changes we experience in life. If we can see that changes are simply part of life, it gives us the opportunity to deal more effectively with all forms of life stress.

It turns out that it is not the potential stressor itself that determines whether it will lead to stress, but how we perceive it and deal with it. Sometimes a small event can lead to an excessive reaction that is disproportionate to the event. This can happen when we feel tired and vulnerable. At other times we can handle annoyances and difficult experiences without effort.

Pillar of mindfulness practice: 'trust'

Developing trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of this training. It is much better to trust your own intuition and authority, even if you make 'mistakes' every now and then, than to always look for help outside of yourself. If something does not feel right, why would you not respect your feelings? Why would you not take them seriously or dismiss them as unfounded because some authority or group of people thinks or says otherwise? This trust in yourself and your own wisdom and goodness is very important in all aspects of mindfulness practice. You will benefit from it greatly, especially during the movement exercises. When you are practicing and your body tells you to stop or not even start a certain exertion, you will have to respect your own feelings. If you do not listen, you could injure yourself.

By being mindful, you take the responsibility to be yourself and learn to listen to and trust your own being. The more you develop this trust in your own being, the easier it will be to trust other people more and also see their fundamental goodness.

The 3-minute breathing space

The breathing space exercise allows you to switch off the automatic pilot and reconnect with the present moment.

A mnemonic you can use to remember the steps is ABB:

step 1: Awareness

step 2: Breathing

step 3: Body

Step 1: Awareness

Become more aware of how things are at this moment by adopting an upright and dignified posture, whether you are sitting or standing. Close your eyes if you wish. Then bring your awareness to your inner experience, acknowledge it and ask yourself:

'What am I experiencing right now?'

'What thoughts do I have?'

Acknowledge your thoughts as best as you can as mental events. Knowing what is going on in your mind right now.

'What emotions do I have?'

Bring your attention to your emotions, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, and acknowledge them. This is how it is right now.

'What bodily sensations do I have right now?'

Do a quick body scan to notice sensations of tension or tightness and acknowledge them.

Step 2: Breathing: directing the attention

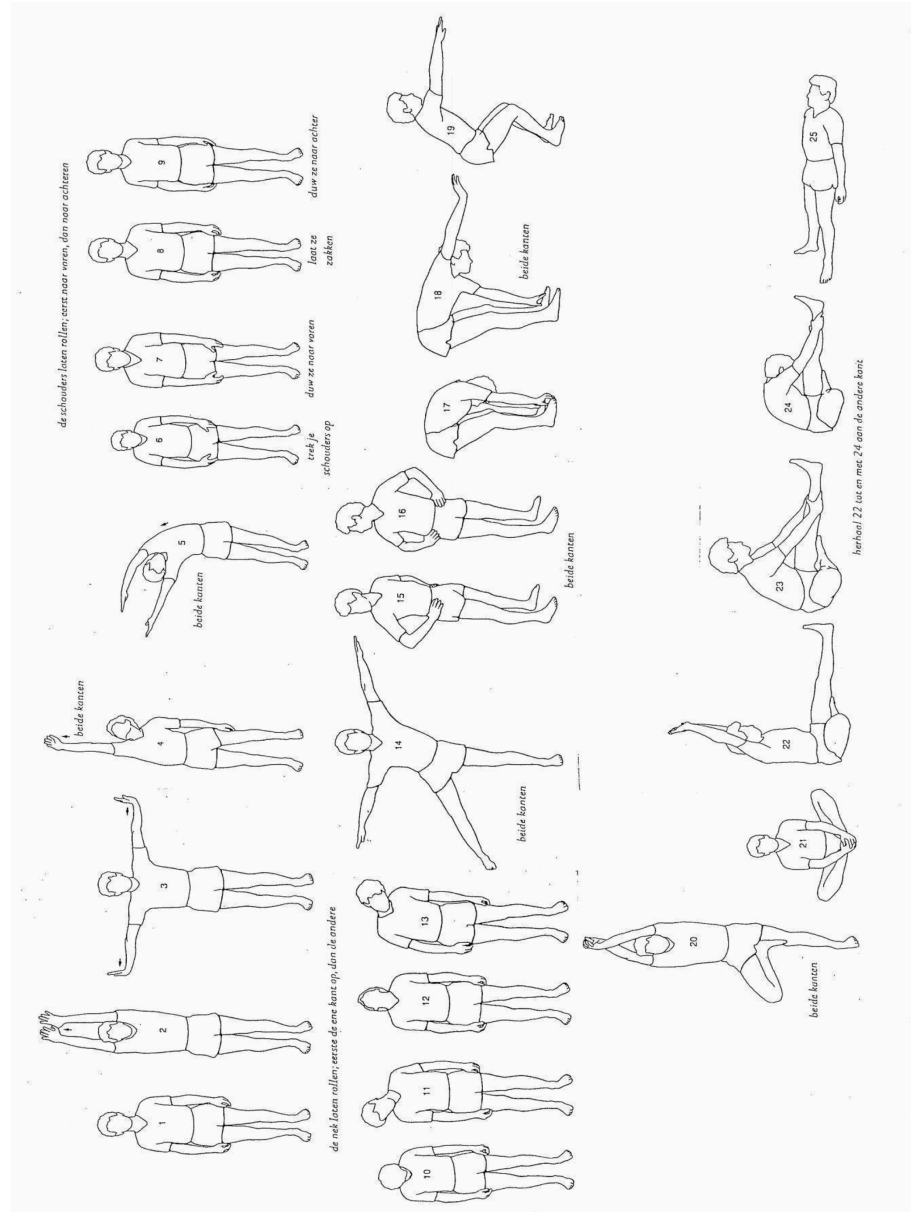
Then focus your attention on the physical sensations of the breathing itself. Feel the movement of the chest area or the abdominal wall expanding on the inhalations and retracting on the exhalations. Follow the inhalation and exhalation from beginning to end and use the breath to anchor yourself in the present moment.

Step 3: Body: expanding

Expand the awareness of your breathing in such a way that you feel your body as a whole, your posture and your facial expression.

If you become aware of sensations of discomfort, tension or resistance, bring your awareness to them by breathing into them. Then breathe out and soften and widen the area of awareness with your exhalation. Take this expanded awareness into the next moments of your day as best as you can.

Staande bewegingsoefeningen



Practice after session 4

Alternate sitting in awareness with standing movement exercises. Sitting in awareness for instance on day 1, 3 and 5. Standing movement exercises on day 2, 4 and 6. If you have back or other health problems that could form a barrier, decide for yourself which exercises you do or do not do. In case of doubt, consult a doctor. As an alternative, you can also practice walking in awareness. You can also use this as a 'routine activity with awareness'. Make notes on your registration form.

Three-minute breathing space Throughout the day, take the time to do the 3-minute breathing exercise one or more times.

Fill in the stress log (one event per day) Pay attention to your bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings that you notice during the stressful event. Do you react from habit or with conscious awareness? In this exercise, it does not matter how you react, but whether you are aware of it.

The guest house

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Rumi

STRESS LOG (after Session 4)

For one week, be aware of your reactions during stressful events. Later, write down what the event was and how you experienced it.

What was the stressful event?	How did you recognize the stress? (Bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions?)	Did you react automatically? If so how?	Did you react from conscious awareness? If so how?	Date
				Day 1 Date:
				Day 2 Date:
				Day 3 Date:
				Day 4 Date:
				Day 5 Date:
				Day 6 Date:
				Day 7 Date:

Practice Log – Session 4

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:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	
Day 2 Date:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	
Day 3 Date:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	
Day 4 Date:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	
Day 5 Date:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	
Day 6 Date:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	
Day 7 Date:	Sitting in awareness or standing movement exercises Three-minute breathing space Stress responses reflection	

Space for Additional Notes