

Session 5

Having an answer to stress instead of reacting

Introduction to Session 5

How can we deal with stress more wisely and skillfully? And what is meant by responding skillfully? When you respond skillfully to an experience, you make space for what is happening in your body and mind. This way, you are better able to consciously answer situations and choose how you react, instead of from habit (on automatic pilot). You learn to relate differently to your thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, and to allow more of what is there. We no longer have to fight, flee or switch to other things in our head.

The same applies to dealing with stressful situations, which of course we all encounter. For one person, that means giving an important presentation; for another, it is doing groceries. Whatever the stressful situation may be, you learn not to react automatically, but more consciously. You make space for the right choice at that moment. This is what we call the stress response.

Example of a stress response: your child deliberately knocks a glass of water over the table during dinner. You feel the tension rising like a volcano in your body. You stop, acknowledge the tension in your body and the tendency to get angry, and decide to look at her with surprise and clean up the glass, instead of perhaps shouting or reacting in another annoyed way.

You do not have to follow the path of fight, flight or freeze every time you are stressed. You can also choose not to do so. That is when awareness begins to play a role. Simply by paying attention to what is happening, while it is happening.

As soon as you become aware of what is going on in a stressful situation, you have already radically changed that situation. You are no longer unconscious and no longer reacting from automatic pilot. You are fully present and the stressful situation unfolds as it unfolds. And because you are now completely part of the situation, your conscious presence actually changes the entire situation, even before you have to do anything.

This inner change is important because it offers you a range of possibilities.

Example: you feel that a colleague is being annoying and you notice feelings of irritation. You can notice those feelings and take a few conscious breaths. Then you can decide not to put the other person in their place straight away, but to let it be, because that is the wisest thing to do at that moment.

Example: you are waiting in a long queue at the checkout and you notice that you feel impatient. You could transform that feeling into a decision to practice patience. You can pay attention to your breath and remind yourself that waiting in a line simply takes time.

Example: you stub your toe terribly hard against a table. Instead of losing yourself in anxious reactions about the experience of pain ('oh how awful, maybe I can never play tennis again, this is not going to end well'), you can simply notice those anxious reactions and breathe through them.

Awareness

If you succeed in recognizing and being aware of your impulses to react in a moment of stress, you have taken an important step. You then do not have to suppress all your thoughts and feelings associated with heightened arousal and stress. You can simply allow yourself to feel threatened or anxious or angry or hurt at these moments, and to feel the tension in your body. By being conscious in the present, you can recognize this as thoughts and feelings and sensations.

This simple, rapid shift from unconscious reaction to conscious recognition can reduce the power of the stress reaction and its grip on you. At that moment, you then have a real choice. You can still follow the path of the stress reaction, but you no longer have to. You no longer have to react automatically in the old familiar way when you receive the signal to act. Instead, you can give a response.

Of course, we cannot exhibit this inner response in a stressful situation if we count on awareness and concentration to just appear out of nowhere whenever we need them, or if we expect that we should be able to simply force our mind and body with our will to be calm when they are not. But we have actually been training our mind and body all along to answer stress in this way, during mindfulness practice, when we were developing and deepening precisely these qualities.

The capacity to answer stress consciously develops every time we experience discomfort or pain or strong feelings during practice and we merely observe them and try to let them be as they are, without reacting immediately. In this way, moment by

moment, we develop a different perspective and different responses when unhelpful automatic tendencies arise.

When you choose to follow the path of the stress response, it obviously does not mean that you will never feel threatened or anxious or angry, or that you will never do something unwise or self-destructive. What it does mean is that when those feelings and impulses are there, you can notice them more quickly. Your awareness may or may not temper the intensity of the arousal you feel. That will depend on the circumstances. But in general, awareness reduces arousal in the moment itself, or it helps you to recover from it more quickly afterwards.

Developing a stress response

How do we consciously develop the stress response in our daily life? In the same way that we develop mindfulness during the training: moment by moment, anchoring ourselves in our body and in our breathing. When you are angry or notice that you feel stressed, when the tendency to fight or flee arises, you could try to bring your attention to your tense face and shoulders, to your heart that is starting to pound, to your stomach where you get a strange feeling, to whatever you might notice of how your body feels at that moment. You could say to yourself: 'this is it.' Or: 'this is a stressful situation.'

Thanks to your mindfulness, you can give appropriate responses in the here and now. If you are quick enough, you can sometimes catch the stress reaction before it fully develops and respond from a conscious response.

It takes practice to catch stress reactions at the moment they occur. When you are willing to meet every situation consciously, every situation becomes an opportunity to practice with stress responses instead of stress reactions.

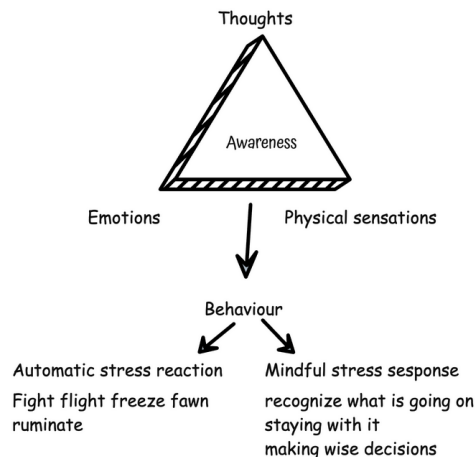
You can be sure that you will not be able to exhibit a response instead of an automatic reaction in every single situation. It would not be realistic to expect that of yourself. But simply by trying to look at each of these moments with a broader perspective, stressors can sometimes become challenges and help you see new options, solutions to problems.

The fact that you can learn to answer stress with awareness does not mean that you will never react again or no longer be overcome by anger or grief or fear. It is not that we try to suppress our emotions when we answer stress. It is more that we learn how to work with all our reactions, emotional and physical, in such a way that we are less controlled by them and see more clearly what we ought to do.

What occurs in a certain situation depends on the severity of what happens and its meaning to you. You cannot devise a single plan in advance to use as a strategy in all stressful situations. To be able to answer stress, you need to be aware from moment to moment and take each moment as it is. You know that you no longer want to react in the old way, but you might not yet know what it means to answer in a new and different way. Every opportunity you get will be different. The number of options you have will depend on the circumstances. But when you meet the situation with awareness, you will at least have all your resources at your disposal. You will have the freedom to be creative.

When you develop your awareness, your capacity to be fully present can manifest itself even under the most distressing circumstances. Sometimes this will reduce your pain, sometimes perhaps not. But awareness offers a certain comfort, even when you are suffering greatly. We could call this the comfort of wisdom and inner trust, the comfort of being whole (Kabat-Zinn, 2014)

In the diagram below, you can see how the experience immediately leads to a reaction in your system. Thoughts, emotions and physical sensations arise, which subsequently lead to behavior. It often seems as if the experience and your reactions form a single whole. By reflecting on the triangle of awareness, you can experience that there is a moment of choice. Either you react from impulses or the automatic pilot, or you see that there are also alternative reactions that allow you to relate to the experience in a different way.



Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Chapter I.

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in. I am lost. I am helpless.
It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I still don't see it. I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
It isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it there, I still fall in. It's habit.
It's my fault. I know where I am.
I get out immediately.

Chapter IV.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter V.

I walk down a different street.

Pillar of mindfulness practice: 'non-striving'

Almost everything we do, we do with a purpose, to get or achieve something. But in sitting in awareness, this attitude can form a monumental obstacle. This is because sitting in awareness is different from all other human activities. Although in a sense this practice requires a lot of work and energy, sitting in awareness is ultimately non-doing. It has no goal other than for you to be yourself. The irony of this is that you already are. This sounds paradoxical and a bit crazy. Yet this paradox and this craziness can point the way to a new way of seeing yourself, where you exert less effort and are more. For this, you must deliberately develop the attitude of non-striving.

For example, if you sit down to practice and you think: i am going to become relaxed or become enlightened, or control my pain, or become a better person, then you have conjured up an idea of where you should be, and this triggers the idea that you are not okay at this moment. 'If only I were calmer, or more intelligent, or worked harder, or more this or more that, if only my heart were healthier or my knee not worn out, then I would be okay. But at this moment I am not.'

This attitude is not helpful for developing awareness, which is simply about paying attention to whatever is happening. If you are tense, just pay attention to the tension. If you are in pain, stay with your pain as best as you can instead of pushing it away. If you criticize yourself, observe the activity of your judging mind. Just look. Remember that we simply accept everything we experience from moment to moment, because it is already there.

Some people come to a mindfulness training because something is wrong. During the first meeting, we ask them to establish three goals they want to work on during the course. But then we encourage them not to try to make any progress in that direction during the eight weeks of the course, which often comes as a surprise. For instance, if one of the goals is lowering blood pressure or reducing pain or anxiety, they are instructed not to try to lower their blood pressure, not to try to make the pain or anxiety disappear, but simply to remain in the present and carefully follow the instructions.

As you will see later, the best way to achieve your goals in this area is by not striving for results and instead focusing on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment after moment. With patience and practice, the movement toward your goals will occur naturally (Kabat-Zinn, 2014).

Practice after session 5

1. Alternating sitting in awareness with lying movement exercises/body scan. Make notes on your registration form.
2. Three-minute breathing space, a few times a day. Practice three times a day at predetermined times or when you have unpleasant feelings.
3. Fill in the difficult communication log. Make daily notes of difficult communicative moments. Note each time you do so on the registration form and note any comment or difficulty.
4. Pay attention to the way you react in difficult moments and explore alternatives within yourself to respond with more mindfulness, space and creativity. This applies both during sitting in awareness and in daily life. Remember the breath or the body as an anchor, a way to intensify your attention, detect reactive tendencies, become calmer and make more conscious choices.

Difficult communication LOG (after Session 5)

For one week, be aware of your reactions during moments where communications seems difficult. Later, write down what the event was and how you experienced it.

Describe the communication What was the subject, where were you?	What happened, what was the problem?	What did you want from the other person? What did you get?	What did the other person(s) want and what did they get?	How did you feel during this exchange and after?

Practice Log – Session 5

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 alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	
Day 2 Date:	Sitting in awareness alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	
Day 3 Date:	Sitting in awareness alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	
Day 4 Date:	Sitting in awareness alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	
Day 5 Date:	Sitting in awareness alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	
Day 6 Date:	Sitting in awareness alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	
Day 7 Date:	Sitting in awareness alternated by standing movement exercises/body scan Three-minute breathing space Difficult communications reflection	

Space for Additional Notes