Class 2: Mindfulness of the Body

For the remaining weeks, each class letter will begin with a period of mindfulness practice. Each week this guided practice time will increase in length. This is to support your ability to practice for extended periods of time. Feel free to listen to this guided audio throughout the week during your daily practice time.

[10 minute guided mindfulness practice MP3]

Mindfulness of the Body

When we’re aware of our body we are more connected to our actual experience and able to take care of ourselves physically as well as emotionally. Emotions are not just experienced in our mind but in our body as well. When we are upset and angry we might feel heat or tightness. When we are scared we might feel our heart pounding. “I have a sinking feeling in the pit in my stomach” is a common expression from people who are worried, and many people who are stressed feel the “weight on their shoulders”. The more we pay attention to how our body feels the more we can pick up on subtle moods. Often by the time we find out that we’re in a bad mood or about to lose our cool, it’s too late. Paying attention to our bodies may give us an opportunity to address our moods and emotions in more skilful ways. But how exactly do our emotions manifest themselves physically?

Your Second Brain

Michael Gershon, chairman of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at New York–Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center, explains in his book The Second Brain that our hollow internal organs, such as the heart, lungs, digestive track, and liver, are surrounded by a network of nerves. These organs are known as the visceral organs. The vagus nerve (comprised of neuropathways from these visceral organs) sends information up to the
prefrontal cortex, which then integrates that information with the different parts of the brain. Information also passes through the insula, the part of the brain that mediates how the body is doing physically.

Have you ever had someone say “trust your gut instinct”? They may not have known it, but the expression actually applies very literally. The trunk of your body can give you a lot of information about what’s going on physically as well as emotionally. Daniel Siegel outlines the benefits of bringing awareness to these visceral sensations.

- Visceral sensations can alert us to emotions or impulses as they begin to arise. This means we can interrupt a pattern of reacting emotionally if we cultivate awareness. This then gives us the power to choose a different response.

- The right hemisphere of the brain takes the lead in perceiving visceral sensations, while the left hemisphere is mainly responsible for linguistics and logic. When an emotion is felt in the body and “recognized” by the right hemisphere and then labeled (using anchor words, as we learned in Lesson 1) by the left hemisphere, hemispheric functions are integrated. An outcome of this hemispheric integration is that emotions appear to lose some of their intensity and power when they are labeled. (Lieberman et al., 2011)

- (There is an added benefit of being in touch with the physical expression of our emotions.) Awareness of our visceral responses can help increase empathy for others. When we see others who are displaying strong emotions like distress or exuberance we can actually feel by imagination and memory how that person is feeling based on our own past experiences.

References


Of course it’s also important to notice the rest of the body beyond the visceral organs. Knowing how our physical body is doing can help us take care of it in a more healthy way. When we are busy or preoccupied with a full schedule or pressing personal matters, we often forget to pay attention to the exertion we demand from our body ignoring our physical limitations. To start focusing in more on the body, we will practice a few different exercises to help us strengthen our attention.

**Body Scan**

One way to heighten our awareness of our body is to intentionally pay attention to the different areas that comprise our physical form. The body scan does just that. This exercise can be done seated or lying down. Sometimes you might notice this practice bringing energy to the body and mind. Other times, you may notice relaxation and perhaps even sleepiness. If excessive relaxation and sleepiness arise and you would like to encourage more alertness, open your eyes and sit up straight. Either way, position yourself comfortably and mindfully observe what’s happening.

[Body Scan MP3]

---

E-mail Questions — click here

2. What was the body scan like for you? What did you notice?

The body scan demonstrates the ever changing state of your body. Personally, the body scan has allowed me to appreciate the immense number of experiences happening at one time. Very often, I find that I take the inner workings of my body for granted. Sometimes it’s not until I pull a hamstring or get the flu that I recognize the body’s importance and fragility.

With this type of body awareness, it’s not unusual to notice things that were just under the radar like a pain in the knee or stiffness in the shoulder. Participants sometimes say, “Well it wasn’t there until I started being aware of it.” This, of course, is unlikely. The physical sensation may not have been noticed, but was probably there all along. Others experience an increase in
uncomfortable sensations when attending to different parts of their bodies. A benign example of this is an itch on the skin. It’s true that increased attention of a physical sensation can sometimes make it seem stronger because of your heightened awareness of it. When this happens, several opportunities arise. Here are some suggestions.

You could use this heightened awareness of a sensation to study, with curiosity and interest, what that particular sensation is. Using an itch as an example, see what makes that itch feel like an itch. You can penetrate the sensation almost as if you are looking at it under a microscope. Is it a sharp sensation or is it dull? Does it have a temperature? Is there tingling or twitching? Is it a constant feeling or is it pulsing or does it fade in and out? This type of investigation can be done with any physical sensation as long as it’s bearable.

Another way to be present with uncomfortable or increasing sensations is to notice what your relationship is to that sensation. What this means is to become familiar with the different thoughts and emotions that are generated in response to that sensation. This is more of an investigation and study of how your mind reacts. Is there dislike of the sensation and a wanting for it to end, or is there acceptance and compassion? Is there anger or worry or annoyance, or are you able to stay calm and relaxed about it? You might find yourself going back and forth between reaction and acceptance. You might recognize a pattern of how you react to certain stimuli such as itches or aches. By becoming actively curious and interested, it is also possible to discontinue adding your reaction of active dislike.

If you are experiencing strong or unbearable pain, experiment with the idea of choice. You might choose to either move that part of the body to ease the sensation or turn your attention to a different part of the body that feels manageable. If you experience chronic pain, you might want to go in and out of investigating the sensation or your relationship to the pain. Do this very gently and back off when you need to. There is no race and no gold star at the end of this journey, just a compassionate understanding of how your mind and body work together. Explore the body scan while respecting your limits.

**Mindful Movement**

So far we’ve practiced mindfulness while being seated. Now it’s time to start incorporating the same type of present-moment attention while we are moving. Most of our day includes some kind of movement. Mindfulness is meant to be something that you can use throughout your day, no matter where you are or what you are doing. It is a portable practice.

For some people who are new to mindfulness practice, bringing a heightened awareness to movement can feel a little bit like rubbing your belly and patting your head at the same time:
difficult to coordinate. For this reason, we’ll start with very deliberate, slow movement. For the next two exercises, you will focus on the changing sensations as you move your arms and while standing up. We’ll use these movements to investigate and become more familiar with how the body works and feels.

[Mindful Movement – movement of the arm MP3]

[Mindful Movement- standing and sitting MP3]

E-mail Questions – click here

3. What did you notice during the arm movement exercise?
4. What did you notice during the standing up and sitting down exercise?

We use simple movements throughout the day without being aware of them. They are so automatic that we don’t need to think about them. This week you’ll be focusing on these movements. It will be helpful to choose one or two specific tasks that you expect to perform during your day. Here is a list of possibilities.

- Washing dishes
- Opening a door
- Typing on your computer keyboard
- Opening a jar
- Picking up the phone
- Getting in and out of your car

The activity itself might not be significant, but allowing it to be a time to remember to use your mindfulness is very valuable. Let it be a time to notice what your body feels like as it’s performing the task, to notice any emotion, and to notice your breathing. Each time you make mindfulness part of your routine you are retraining your habitual mental tendencies to be filled with more awareness.

Walking or running is also a good place for practice. This next exercise requires some space to explore walking. Feel free to try it outside if it’s a nice day or in the comfort of your home.

[Mindful Movement – walking MP3]

Whether you are jogging, walking down the hallway, or standing in line at the grocery store, intentionally adding more awareness will help ease your
mind and body. Let’s explore standing in line.

Imagine that it’s the end of your day and you need a few things from the store before you go home. The lines are long and you’re feeling tired and maybe a little spaced out. You suddenly remember to use your mindfulness and start bringing your attention into your feet and legs. You take some deep breaths and notice how you are feeling. You realize that you’re tired, but now that you’re present for the moment you can start appreciating the things around you. The cashier is having a funny conversation with the person in front of you and there are a couple of kids giggling in the next line. You notice how you’re ready to get home but feel okay about being in line at the grocery store. You relax the muscles in your face and continue paying attention to your breath and body sensations. Overall the experience is now richer, and even rather pleasant.

This is just an example of how using mindfulness can have a subtle impact on how you are interacting in the world. Instead of tuning out or feeling restless or impatient while in line, you have the choice to refocus your attention. Being mindful of course doesn’t mean that you’re always going to have a positive outlook, but when you bring awareness to a situation you will find that you might be able to choose a different way of being present for what’s happening.

**During the Week**

This week, bring awareness to your movements and to your body. Choose a task that will help you remember to notice simple movements. Also, bring more awareness to walking and exercising. You might find that the more physical an activity is, the easier it is to pay attention to your body.

Answer the questions in the Mindfulness of the Body Worksheet. This will help you keep momentum throughout the week and facilitate deeper personal understanding of the exercises. Email any questions or comments you’d like to share with the teacher or the group.

Keep practicing your mindful breathing. Try increasing your time to 10 minutes a day if you haven’t already. Keep using the Mindfulness Log if it is helpful.

Your intention to practice during the week is important. Take a moment right now to either mentally reflect or journal about why you want to incorporate mindfulness into your life. Make a personal pledge to keep up with this week’s practices. Remind yourself that simple, short, and discreet moments of mindfulness can make a difference.

Have a wonderful week,

Kate Janke