Class Three: Mindfulness of Emotions

I hope your week went well. I’d like you to write a little bit about it by answering the question below. This is a great way to reflect on insights, questions, or challenges that may have come up for you.

This week we will be focusing on emotions. We are also gently increasing our sitting time to 15 minutes. Please listen to the following audio file before proceeding with the material.

[15 minute guided mindfulness practice]

E-mail Questions

1. What was your experience doing the body and movement practices last week? Please include any questions or stories you’d like to share.

Our Full Range of Emotions

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 are 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 whatever comes.  
Because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

- Rumi
In the poem above, Rumi beautifully illustrates the benefits of “entertaining” our emotions through mindful awareness. Even difficult or strong emotions can later open doors to greater understanding about ourselves. There is no escaping it; part of the human experience is emotion. For some, feeling and expressing emotion may seem natural. Others might find emotions tricky to navigate or uncomfortable to explore. Whether you identify as a person who is in touch with your emotions, or someone who more naturally suppresses them, there is plenty to learn and understand about ourselves when we bring attention to our emotional patterns.

One universally strong human tendency is to focus on negative experiences rather than positive ones. The same could be said for emotions. This doesn’t just apply to people who see the “glass half empty”. Another common tendency is that when our moods are negative, we want things to be different—sometimes desperately so. I often notice this in myself. But when we’re feeling just fine, often we don’t fully notice our positive or neutral states. Of course, this is not always the case, but if this sounds like a familiar story, the challenge for the week is to be mindful of the full range of your emotions, positive and negative, without judging them or without analyzing how the situation could be different.

**Hardwiring of the Brain**

Our brains are wired in ways that were evolutionarily critical to the survival of our distant ancestors. Those who survived were able to avoid danger by assessing and quickly reacting to threats. They were always on the lookout and alert to anything negative that might be in the vicinity. Have you ever watched a deer walking through the woods, their ears twitching, their movements deliberate, often looking over their shoulders ready to run at the first sight of a threat? Perhaps, this is how early humans roamed the earth as well.

The world around us has changed rapidly especially in the last few hundred years, and most of us today are not challenged by the same threats that our early ancestors were. However, our brain still looks out for negative experiences as a way to protect ourselves.
The area of the brain that is responsible for detecting certain emotions related to threats, particularly fear, is the amygdala. As with nearly all other parts of the brain, there are two amygdala, seen here in red, found in the right and left hemispheres. Once the amygdala decide on the appropriate emotion depending on the stimulus, they tell the body what type of reaction it should have (fight, flight, freeze, or hide). For example, if the deer senses something moving in the bushes (the stimulus), that information travels through the brain, sorts through memory of past events and outcomes, and goes to the amygdala. The amygdala takes that information, categorizes it as danger and sends out a fear response directing the deer to run for its life (flight).

The amygdala is neurologically primed to interpret experiences as frightening or negative, to aid in self-preservation. In addition, these experiences are then categorized as “negative” and stored in the memory for future reference. This way, the brain can compare new experiences with old ones. Even when they are similar, the amygdala can quickly categorize threats and respond. It is a very effective system for keeping our species alive.

This way of mental processing is still useful in modern times. It keeps us safe and sometimes helps us avoid experiences that have made us fearful or unhappy in the past. However, our brains are hardwired to search for negative experiences and not positive ones. Unless a positive experience is felt strongly or repetitively and a conscious effort is made to store it, it is processed at low priority and may not be as memorable. This is why bringing mindful attention to positive and even neutral experiences is so important.

References


Though our brains are wired to seek out the negative, the use of mindfulness can counter balance that by giving attention to positive experiences. This week our focus is not on pushing away the negative, but rather, giving attention to the full spectrum of ways we respond or react to situations in our lives. To start this process, it is important to become familiar with how our emotions arise and how we identify them. Identifying Emotions from Thoughts

In class one, we talked about how we can be thinking about something that triggers an emotion in response to the thought. It can also work in the opposite direction. We may feel a certain
emotion that triggers thoughts relating to our mood. Often, the experience is cyclical; a thought comes and triggers an emotion that then triggers more thinking; this may occur again and again.

An example of this process may occur when we start thinking about something or someone that makes us really frustrated, maybe even angry. The more we think about them the more that emotion strengthens. The more the emotion strengthens the more we obsessively think about that situation or person. Even though the person is not with us, or the situation is not actually happening in that moment, our thoughts and imagination are powerful enough that we emotionally respond as if they were. Our physiological responses kick in as well—our pulse quickens, our blood pressure rises, and our muscles may tighten.

The reality is that this whole experience was perpetuated just by thoughts and emotions! Without mindfulness we can easily get sucked into a storyline in our head without being conscious of how it is affecting us. For this reason, we will learn how to identify and put our attention on the emotions rather than on the storyline that we have created in our head.

If we use the previous example of thinking about someone who frustrates us, the storyline might contain how they wronged us, what was said, what we plan to say next time we see them, and so on. In this way, it’s easy to build up a tremendous amount of momentum toward negative thinking when powered by “negative” emotions.

The emotion involved in this particular example is simply “anger”. As we will see shortly, identifying our emotions simply and separating them from the storyline makes them far easier to deal with.

This practice of separating storyline from emotion can, of course, also be done with more positive experiences, helping us to stay more balanced.

Let’s start by finding ways to identify the emotion behind the mental stories.

**Mindfulness of Emotions in the Body**

Every now and then, I’ll get home from a full day of work and teaching, plop down on the couch, and notice my shoulders are tense and pulled up toward my ears. When I realize this I instantly recognize that I was experiencing some kind of stress or anxiety during the day that went unnoticed. Last week we discussed how emotions can be experientially felt physically in the body. We all hold our emotions in different places in the body. In my case, stress happens to land on my neck and shoulders. You can use your body as an indicator for most emotions you’re having, but you have to first
become familiar with how each one feels. To see for yourself what I’m talking about, listen to the following audio file.

[Feeling Emotions in the Body]

_E-mail Questions_

2. Write about your experience. What did you notice?
3. Did you notice any emotions that you couldn’t feel in your body?

When we are unaware of our emotions due to busy schedules, caring for other people, or a scattered mind, it’s easy to become out of touch with our emotional experience. Just as your alarm clock signals you when it’s time to get up, using the body as a signal of your emotional wellbeing throughout the day will keep you more connected to yourself. Because I am aware that stress often shows up in my shoulders, I can always check there to catch the mounting tightness signaling stress. Whether you are a teacher, caregiver, parent, or a pizza delivery person, being mindful of emotions as they arise or even afterward can help interrupt an increase in stress, worry, anxiety, and even compassion fatigue.

Awareness of emotions in your body can also help you notice when more positive experiences are being felt. A relaxed, loose, energized body is something to tune in to. A smile or relaxed forehead can be a sign on contentment. To start inclining your mind towards these moments, allow yourself time to really recognize them. Often, applying extra attentiveness to a negative emotion can weaken its potency, while in the case of a positive emotion it can allow it to become stronger. Without being aware of your emotional state, neither of these options are accessible.

_Creating Space_

Strong emotions can be tricky to navigate with mindfulness. When we are experiencing something like anger we often fall into our personal patterns of reaction. These reactions might take the form of lashing out or retreating, of being in denial or overreacting, sulking or bullying. Often, we recognize these patterns as our own, but feel helpless to change them. In fact, it may be hard to differentiate between the emotion you feel and your reaction to it. The reactions can happen so quickly and so unconsciously that it might not be until after we have reacted that we feel remorse.
As we begin to strengthen our mindfulness and start to apply it to these situations, we create space between the emotion and the reaction.

This space might just be a couple of seconds or it might be a day of reflection. Either way, it gives us the choice to respond to the situation rather than just reacting. As we begin to strengthen this ability, we might first notice that we still react in our familiar old ways but are now more aware of ourselves as we react. Keep in mind that this is a learning process and it might take several tries before you break some of those old habits. Most of your habits have been with you since childhood; imagine how long you’ve been perfecting them. Of course, it will take time to “un-perfect” them—so be kind and patient with yourself.

### Bringing More Awareness to Emotion

The following exercises are meant to help bring more awareness to your emotions and your relationship to those emotions.

In your mindfulness journal or on a piece of paper, respond to the following question 10 times.

**What behavioral tendencies or reactions are common for you when you are experiencing difficult emotions?**

Each time see if you can come up with a different answer. You responses can be as long or as short as you want. It’s important to be honest and current with your responses. Also, keep in mind that a difficult emotion doesn’t have to be a “negative” emotion. Here are some examples.

1. *Sometimes I withdraw and get quiet because I’m afraid I might take it out on others.*
2. *I tend to yell and to take it out on the people I’m closest to.*
3. *I go for a run. Exercise really helps me when I’m over stimulated.*
4. *I don’t really deal with it; I try to busy myself with work and household projects.*

...and so on

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**E-mail Questions**

4. **Share two of your responses that you found to be either unexpected or personally informative to you.**
Creating Balance with Mindfulness

Strong or difficult emotions often get a bad rap. They easily get judged as wrong or bad or inappropriate because they are potent and might make others uncomfortable. In mindfulness practice it’s important to understand that we are just observing these emotions without needing to add extra judgment. If judgment comes, no problem; notice the judgment.

There is something to be said for and even celebrated about strong or difficult emotions. They can motivate us to do something when we see injustice such as deprivation of human rights or destruction of the planet. When coupled with these strong powerful guiding force towards mindfulness is not part of the emotions only creating strong example might be a protest ends up erupting into violence.

Strong positive emotions, such with mindfulness, can be some, however, intense joy or and so is suppressed. For others may come easy but overwhelm connect with. If this last rings true for you, this week you may want to concentrate your practice on finding a balance of expression by simply checking in with your body and truest intentions behind sharing your elation.

It has been my experience that recognizing my emotional state and creating the space to be present with it, has increased my capacity to be with strong and uncomfortable emotions. This capacity creates confidence to act appropriately during any emotional experience instead of letting the experience control me. This is one of the most precious gifts of having a mindfulness practice.

During the Week

Focus your attention on your emotions throughout the day. To help you do this, use your journal or notebook to write down what you noticed each day about your emotions. (Did they change? Were they steady? Was it obvious to you how you were feeling? Were they subtle and not obvious?) Also, answer the question in the Mindfulness of Emotions Worksheet.

Continue your intentional mindfulness practice each day. Increase your average time to 15 minutes per day. Record your experience every day. This intentional practice will greatly support your awareness of emotion and body throughout the day. If you find that you just can’t carve out 15 minutes, do what you can. It’s more important that you do 5 minutes than not do
any at all. Another solution might be splitting the 15 minutes up throughout the day; 5 minutes before breakfast, 5 minutes after lunch, 5 minutes before bed. Make this practice work for you.

Good luck and enjoy the week,

Kate Janke