

Using Mindfulness to Let Go of Negative and Unhelpful Thoughts

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What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing our *awareness of the present moment, calmly and in an accepting way*. This involves learning to notice our feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations, without judging ourselves or trying to change how we feel. Derived from Buddhist meditation techniques, Mindfulness is now widely used as a practical and accessible therapeutic technique.

You may, at times, be preoccupied by negative thoughts, which may involve self-criticism, or worries about your MS symptoms. These negative thought patterns can feel like a stuck record that keeps playing over and over in our minds. We may try to distract ourselves, but then find that our minds return to the same negative chatter as before.

If you have recurrent negative thoughts, you gradually feel emotions becoming more negative as well, leading to chronic worry or low mood. This can lead to further negative thinking as the vicious cycle becomes more deeply entrenched. Eventually, you may feel stuck, as aches and pains seem to confirm the negative beliefs about your illness.

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a therapeutic technique combining the best aspects of both Mindfulness and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), by providing a means of directing thoughts to the present moment, rather than dwelling on past or future concerns. At the same time, providing the opportunity to detach the mind from the negative thinking patterns that feel so real.

'Thoughts are not facts'

When we are anxious or depressed, we believe that things will go wrong, or that we are flawed, or that we are a burden to others. These thoughts can feel real, but are in fact *simply thoughts* which we do not have to believe. They are actually symptoms of our mood state. By

looking at a thought as ‘just a thought’ or ‘just worrying’, we take the power out of it and give ourselves a chance to think differently. A good way to test this out is to think of a negative thought you might have (e.g. ‘I am not good company’) and ask a friend if they agree with your thought. They will most likely challenge it by saying something like, ‘No, I enjoy seeing you – you are a great support to me and I value you as a friend’. So the *belief* that you are worthless cannot be a *fact* if others can disagree with it.

‘I am not my thoughts’

Often when a person is suffering from a chronic illness, the negative thoughts tend to arise from physical symptoms. This can gradually allow physical symptoms to determine mood, instead of seeing them as separate. If your physical symptoms are allowed to direct your mood, then any change in symptoms will automatically lead to a change for better or worse in your mood. This can be frustrating, and lead to mood swings or depression, depending on which way the physical cues direct things.

By detaching your thoughts from your symptoms, you can enjoy more control over your feelings. By noticing and observing thoughts, but not identifying them as real, or as part of your identity, you can then find a way of maintaining a steady mood despite fluctuations in your physical state. Clearly, this is a more constructive path than letting your physical state be the conductor of the whole orchestra!

Practice this simple mindfulness exercise:

First, find a comfortable position. Spend a few moments being still. Now, focus your attention on the physical sense of your breathing. Notice the sensation of the breath as it travels to your lungs as you inhale, and then as it travels back out as you exhale. Continue with this for a few minutes. You will find that your mind wanders during the practice. This is normal. Just refocus your mind by gently pulling it back to your breathing.

Many mindfulness practitioners describe the mind as like a playful puppy, wandering and finding things to explore. Mindfulness is a means of gently letting the mind be still, and this simple practice has many benefits. By accepting the way that the mind works, we feel less dominated by the emotional ebb and flow, and we can observe the process without getting swept away by it.

If you are interesting in learning more about Mindfulness, or any of the previous topics in these articles, feel free to contact me at annehickox@nhs.net.

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