

The Positive Mind Stress Reduction (PMSR) Program

INTRODUCTION

What will the PMSR course do for me?

Through this course, you will learn the valuable skills that increase your ability to:

- Cope with stress, pain, and the challenges of everyday life
- Deal with disturbing events with resilience and composure
- Be fully present in your daily and working life.

While PMSR is not a “cure” for serious medical conditions and should not be used as a substitute for medical treatment, research indicates that mindfulness training can have a significant therapeutic effect for countless ailments. Those experiencing stress, anxiety, high blood pressure, depression, chronic pain, migraines, heart conditions, diabetes greatly benefit from bringing mindfulness into their daily and working lives. In addition, participants typically report feeling more alive, more “in-tune” with themselves and others and enjoy life on a much deeper level.

The Importance of Practice

This course is highly experiential and the daily practice is perhaps the most important component. Firstly, you will learn the techniques and skills, which you will then bring into your daily life. This is where the real practice can begin. Your individual practice of these skills is vital so that you can reap the fruits of your labour. Just like reading a book is the first step to learning a new skill, you will be equipped with the right tools to reduce stress in your life in your own unique experiences. Learning a mindfulness practice is no different than any other skill that involves both mind and body. You will see that practice is key. *Your body/mind dynamic is the most complex instrument in the universe. It takes time and consistency to use it effectively and harmoniously.*

THE PROGRAM

WEEK 1

In Week one, we take a look at the nature of stress, its impact on us and some vital techniques to utilise against stress.

- What is Stress?
- How Stress Affects Us
- Effective Time Management
- Introduction to Relaxation
- Mindful Meditation – The Body Scan
- Reading & Videos

What is Stress?

We know that stress can affect different people in different ways and for different reasons. Stress is often defined as a conflict between the demands placed on us and our ability to cope with these demands. The way we cope with these demands depends on the way we think, our personality and our previous life experiences.

How Does Stress Affects Us?

Stress Affects our life at work and at home

The physical and mental wellbeing is compromised by a permanent state of stress and the presence of cortisol in the system sustained throughout the day. The result may produce psychological conditions such as emotional disorder, irritability leading to anger, a sense of rejection moving us into depression and physical conditions such as an immune response disorder, chronic muscle tension, and increased blood pressure. These problems can eventually lead to serious life-threatening illnesses such as heart attacks, kidney disease, and cancer.

Stress Affects Our Health

Neuroscientists have discovered how chronic stress and cortisol can damage the brain. Stress leads to long-term changes in brain structure and function. Young people who are exposed to chronic stress early in life are more prone later in life to mental problems such as depression, anxiety, mood disorders as well as learning difficulties.

Stress Affects our Brain

It has long been established that stress-related illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD trigger changes in brain structure. Some differences include the size and connectivity of the part of the brain responsible for thought and emotional processing, the amygdala. The 'stress hormone' cortisol affects the neuropathways specifically at the amygdala in a way that creates a vicious cycle within the brain leaving it predisposed to be in a constant state of freeze-fight-flight.

Time management

This is essential in managing stress levels. We need to differentiate between what is important and what is not important; what is a priority and what can wait until tomorrow.

Time management is a skillset of principles, practices, tools, and systems working together to help us get more value out of our time. It helps us to be more relaxed, work more effectively and enjoy our lives more intensely. It greatly improves our quality of life.

With effective time management, we can feel accomplishment from our daily activities and we can reduce the effects of stress in our lives.

Finally, during this section of the course, we will explore the concept of **relaxation**. One definition of relaxation is: a state of being free from tension and anxiety.

Relaxation is about resting your mind and body, which is an important part of taking care of yourself.

We will also learn the **Body Scan Meditation**.

WEEK 2

- How Stress affects our Thinking
- Paying Attention
- Journaling
- Introduction to Stretching
- Mindful Meditation – An Introduction to Meditation

How Stress affects our Thinking

In week two we explore how stress impacts on our thinking. Stress can be a dangerous enemy for the brain. In fact, it can have serious effects on your brain's ability to operate properly.

While stress appears to have originated from our “fight or flight” response, which is the instinct that decides if an animal should fight something trying to kill it, or run away, we don’t have to deal with that much nowadays in everyday life, so it has adapted to our change of lifestyle.

In 2007, Robert Sapolsky, a famous Stanford University neuroscientist stated *“Primates are super smart and organized just enough to devote their free time to being miserable to each other and stressing each other out. But if you get chronically, psychosocially stressed, you’re going to compromise your health. So, essentially, we’ve evolved to be smart enough to make ourselves sick.”*

A [Yale study](#) from 2012 found stress can shrink the brain in the amygdala and the hippocampus, the areas that control emotions and metabolism. The research showed prolonged stress can increase a person’s ability to indulge in substance abuse and risky behaviour.

Another study from the University of California, Berkeley found that chronic stress, even at relatively low levels, can make a person [prone to mental illness](#) later in life. Specifically, stress damages the integrity of the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain that deals with memory and emotions. Hormones like cortisol and other biological reactions created by stress essentially disrupt the balance of how much white and grey matter the brain is creating, which affects how the brain operates. The hippocampus is believed to be strongly connected with emotional disorders and sometimes serious psychological problems.

Bruce McEwen, a leading neuroscientist at Rockefeller University stated “pace of life for some, 24/7 email, text, Facebook, etc., financial concerns, job instability, worry about health and access to healthcare, being a caregiver, commuting and jet lag, poor sleep, lack of physical activity, social isolation, social media (especially among young people) causing anxiety, sleep disruption, noise and pollution, and living in a dangerous neighbourhood” can ALL be causes of serious stress in the modern world.

He said it’s important to note that there is a difference between a traumatic event and being consistently or very regularly stressed, as those two things affect the brain differently. Traumatic events can obviously cause forms of lifelong stress, and acute and/or chronic stress can negatively affect the brain, depending on what kind of stress it is.

Paying Attention

We explore the concept of paying attention; attention is the key to so many things related to our lives. We have to pay attention to walk across the street. We know our relationships are more satisfying if we actually pay attention to one another. Our business affairs require our attention. All of this seems somehow self-evident. We know that attention is important, but we may not know that attention has direct biological results.

We may think we understand the art of paying attention but many times, unfortunately, we mistake attention for judgement. We think about attention as a “critical” function. Attention is not critical. Judgement is. Attention is neutral. We begin to pay attention to something and then we start to judge it, evaluate it, categorize it and, yes, generally “criticize” it. But judging, while certainly useful, is not attention. Judging involves an underlying assumption that our purpose is ultimately to categorize and take action. We judge something to be done with it. The rush to being done with something does not increase our capacity to pay attention to it.

When we judge something we generally assess whether or not we need to “fix” it, reject it or enhance it, and move on. In other words, we are motivated to change it in some way. Whatever it is right now is generally not OK or not enough and has to be altered. If our intention is to fix or change or reject something our capacity to pay attention to it is actually minimized. We will see only as much as we think we need to see to take action. What if there is more to learn?

Attention is noticing and being with something without trying to change it. Attention takes the time to fully explore, to discover whatever there is to know about something, to watch as things change by themselves without our trying to ‘fix’ anything. Attention is patient and attention is kind. No rush. No burden. No criticism.

Healing an injury requires the practice of paying attention, of being with something fully, of focusing upon it over and over again without pushing it away or trying to change it. It is in paying attention that we will discover the tiny threads of healing and transformation that are developing moment to moment. It is attention, not judgement, that will help our brains rewire.

“Welcome Everything; Push Away Nothing”. That might sound odd at first. Why would we “welcome” something unpleasant? The word “welcome” confronts us, asking us to look without judgment and criticism, to invite ourselves to be open to whatever comes, to simply pay attention.

Paying attention is ultimately an act of loving kindness towards ourselves. If we love a child, we pay attention to that child. We watch this child thrive as we give them our attention. We know this works. In this way, we are not different from the child. We too will thrive with attention and as adults, we have the capacity to give that attention to ourselves. Let’s practice simply paying attention, not rushing to judgment. Let’s practice “Welcome Everything; Push Away Nothing.”

Introduction to Meditation

Meditation is a practice where an individual trains the mind or induces a [mode of consciousness](#), where the conscious mind moves into a state of calmness, where it ceases its observation and censorship, thus allowing the subconscious mind to open and listen and learn.

The term meditation refers to a broad variety of practices that includes techniques designed to promote relaxation, build internal energy or life force, also known as Chi or Prana and develop compassion, love, patience, generosity, and forgiveness. A particularly ambitious form of meditation aims at effortlessly sustained single-pointed concentration meant to enable its practitioner to enjoy an indestructible sense of well-being while engaging in any life activity.

The word *meditation* carries different meanings in different contexts. Meditation has been practiced since antiquity as a component of numerous religious traditions and beliefs. Meditation often involves an internal effort to self-regulate the mind in some way. Meditation is often used to clear the mind and ease many health concerns, such as high [blood pressure](#), [depression](#), and [anxiety](#). It may be done [sitting](#), laying on the floor or in an active way — for instance, [Buddhist monks](#) involve awareness in their day-to-day activities as a form of mind-training. Mindfulness is based on the same premise. [Prayer beads](#) or other ritual objects are commonly used during meditation in order to keep track of or remind the practitioner about some aspect of that training.

Meditation may involve generating an emotional state for the purpose of analyzing that state—such as anger, hatred, etc.—or cultivating a particular mental response to various phenomena, such as compassion. The term “meditation” can refer to the state itself, as well as to practices or techniques employed to cultivate the state. Meditation may also involve repeating a mantra and closing the eyes. The mantra is chosen based on its suitability to the individual meditator. Meditation has a calming effect and directs awareness inward until pure awareness is achieved, described as “being awake inside without being aware of anything except awareness itself.” In brief, there are dozens of specific styles of meditation practice, and many different types of activity commonly referred to as meditative practices.

Journaling

Journaling is an effective tool for stress management. It involves the practice of keeping a diary or journal that explores our thoughts and feelings surrounding events in our life. Journaling, as a stress

management tool, works best when done consistently, but even occasional, sporadic journaling can be stress relieving when the practice is focused on gratitude or emotional processing.

Writing down in detail about our feelings and thoughts related to stressful events can be very healing, just as we would discuss topics in therapy. The method you choose can depend on your needs and your personality; just do what feels right.

Journaling allows us to clarify our thoughts and feelings, thereby gaining valuable self-knowledge. It's also a good problem-solving tool; oftentimes, one can hash out a problem and come up with solutions more easily on paper. Journaling about traumatic events helps us process them by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved, and by engaging both hemispheres of the brain in the process, allowing the experience to become fully integrated within our mind. Journaling can also help us to focus on areas of our life that we may like to focus on more often, as is the case with gratitude journaling or even coincidence journaling.

The health benefits of journaling have been scientifically proven. Research shows the following:

- Journaling decreases the symptoms of asthma, arthritis, and other health conditions.
- It improves cognitive functioning.
- It strengthens the immune system, preventing a host of illnesses.
- It counteracts many of the negative effects of stress.

We also learn the importance of stretching and actively have the participants learn these techniques.

WEEK 3

- How we manage our Thoughts
- Stress: Responding vs. Reacting
- STOP: The One-minute Breathing Space
- Mindful Meditation – The Breath
- Reading & Videos

How we manage our Thoughts

Managing our thoughts sometimes is overwhelming, at this point in your practice, you may be noticing just how busy the mind is, with replays of past events, expectations/fears about the future, or evaluations of present experience (“I like this, don’t like that”, “when will this be over?”, etc.). It can seem that the object of meditation is to get rid of all thoughts and distractions, and when that isn’t happening, you may feel like you are failing at meditation and/or the meditation can turn into a struggle, wanting your experience to be different than it is. In fact, the kind of meditation you are learning is more about working skilfully with any internal or external experience, and isn’t really about “getting rid” of thoughts and distractions. In fact, it can be said that wandering thoughts are the weights that train the muscles of the mind.

Stress – Response -v- Reaction:

What is the difference in responding and reacting? While the distinction may seem to be one of semantics, the impact of each in our life can be huge because reacting is an instinctual behaviour directed by the reptilian brain, and responding is a conscious choice involving input from the more evolved brain.

To simplify drastically, the human brain evolved in stages beginning with the reptilian brain, the brainstem, which is primarily concerned with avoiding harm. Next, the mammalian brain, the limbic system, developed which focuses on approaching rewards. Finally, the human brain, the cortex,

formed which is all about attachment. In every human today, these three systems are constantly at work.

The Difference in Your Brain

When anything happens in the environment to cause us to feel the slightest bit threatened, ranging from someone cutting us off in traffic to a co-worker making a critical remark, our reptilian brain activates in the fight or flight reactive mode. A million years ago, this was a good thing to keep our ancestors alive; however, in today's world, it happens all too often. Whenever we are pressured, worried, irritated, or disappointed this same mechanism kicks in which not only an emotional overload that can lead to anxiety and depression but is simply not good for our physical health as chronic stress contributes to a weakened immune system and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

In this reactive mode our avoiding brain expresses fear and anger. The approaching brain reverts to a scarcity perspective which manifests as greed ranging from longing to addiction. The attaching system moves into a position of hurt which may include feelings of abandonment, worthlessness, or loneliness.

When we feel safe and fulfilled, our brain's avoidance system is calm, the approaching drive is content, and the attachment orientation is caring. In this responsive mode, our brain is soothed, joyful and replenished. The good news is that this is the natural, resting state of our brain and where we want to be for happiness and health. The bad news is that too many of us spend most of our time in reactive mode.

Reacting is instinctual. Responding is a conscious choice. When something happens, our body is going to react automatically regardless. The trick is to become aware of this initial reaction, resist doing anything, involve our higher intelligence by considering options, possible ramifications, who we want to be, and what is going to be in our best interest, and, then, choose how to respond.

STOP: The One-minute Breathing Space

During our daily routine, stress is all around us, but when we remember to pause a moment, STOP and breathe, we can alleviate this stress situation. We will practice this one-minute breathing in this week.

WEEK 4

- Difficult Emotions/Sensations
- Mindful Meditation – Haptics and Connection
- Reading & Videos

Difficult Emotions/Sensations

Dealing with Difficult Emotions/Sensations, physical and emotional discomfort, can be hard, painful, fearful and difficult to endure. There are times when we feel anger, anxiety, grief, embarrassment, stress, remorse or other unpleasant emotions.

In these trying times we often want to escape the pain, drown it out or push it away somehow. We may begin a mental struggle with the pain trying to mentally talk our way out of it, or we distract ourselves with activities or drown it out with food or even worse alcohol or drugs.

All these ways of avoiding pain only perpetuate it in the long run. Avoidance creates suffering and keeps us from living fully, this miraculous and precious life that we have.

Mindful Meditation – Haptics and Connection

Through mindful meditation, we can learn to turn our difficult emotions into our greatest teachers and sources of strength.

Instead of 'turning away' from pain in avoidance we can learn to gently 'turn towards' what we're experiencing. We can bring a caring open attention toward the wounded parts of self and make wise choices about how to respond to self and to life.

Six steps for mindfully dealing with difficult emotions...

1. Stop – Turn Towards

Once we have become aware of our feeling, stop for a moment. Take a deep breath and then 'sit with' the anger, shame, guilt, anger, anxiety, frustration and fear. Don't inhibit it, don't suppress it, don't ignore it or try to conquer it. Just be with it with an attitude of open curiosity and acceptance.

2. Identify The Emotion

Acknowledge the emotion is there. If we are embarrassed, we can specifically recognize that feeling. We can mentally say to our self, for example, "I know there is embarrassment in me."

3. Acceptance of What Is

When we are embarrassed or feeling another difficult emotion, we don't need to deny it. We need to learn to accept what is present, without judgement.

Through our mindful acceptance we can embrace or hold the feeling in our awareness– this alone can calm and soothe us. This is an act of self-compassion and responsiveness to our own distress, and it is so much more effective than punishing our self for having this feeling.

See if we can open to the feeling that we feel. Opening to it means to see what is there fully without suppressing, rejecting, ignoring, judging or trying to be 'stronger' than the emotion.

By opening and embracing the emotion we can create a mental space around it and witness it instead of being enmeshed in it. By creating this space we will discover that we are not our anger, our fear or our pain. We are much greater than that.

Think of embracing our difficult emotion in our arms like a mother holding her upset child.

4. Realise – The Impermanence of all emotions

Acknowledge that all emotions are impermanent. They arise, stay for a while and then disappear. They come and go in us like waves in the sea, cresting and receding.

Our task is simply to allow this current wave to be and to witness, with patience, as it continuously changes form and eventually disappears.

We often take emotions, particularly those negative emotions, very personally, and we hold onto these longer than their counterpart. But mindfulness meditation invites us to view them as simply mental events passing through. Just temporary waves in our ocean of awareness.

5. Investigation & Response

When we are calm enough, we can look deeply into our emotion to understand what has brought it about, and what is causing our discomfort.

It may be, that, particular kinds of thoughts were the cause. We may have been worrying unnecessarily about something or someone and that generated feelings of anxiety. Perhaps we were ruminating on a random comment a colleague said last week and it created anger or embarrassment.

We may also find that we have particular values, beliefs, expectations and judgments about how we should behave or be seen by others that contributed to the emotion.

Perhaps an event has happened and our response is perfectly natural or perhaps an old habitual reaction. Allow the light of our mindful awareness to help us gain insights into the emotion.

We may then reflect on how we want to respond to what is happening. This may take the form of simply realising that our thoughts are not reality and therefore not taking them seriously.

It could be that the simple embracing of the emotion is all we need to do for now, or it could be that a response is needed to a situation that has arisen in our daily life.

Trust oneself to choose the appropriate response.

6. Be open to the outcome

Allow ourselves to be open to the outcome, be open to the possibilities. Be open to change.

WEEK 5

- Physical Pain –v- Emotional Pain
- Stress and Physical Pain
- Mindful Meditation – Pain Relief
- Reading & Videos

“Physical Pain” –v- “Emotional Pain”

There is a complex interaction between physical, emotional and mental aspects of self which makes it inaccurate to say a discomfort may be “mental or emotional” or “physical”. We all are aware, and yet forget that significant physical pain is emotionally difficult and by the same token, significant emotional pain has physical consequences.

Stress and Physical Pain

We look after our bodies and our physical health far more than we do our emotional health. We may attend our GP for our six month or twelve-month check-up, but we would never consider having a psychological check-up.

We already know that if a small physical injury, such as a cut, becomes more painful over time, it is a sign of a more serious infection and we attend to that matter for relief. But if we lose a loved one, or are rejected by a work colleague and this is still on our minds several weeks after the event, we are unaware that we might be getting depressed.

We tend to react to physical pain much more diligently than we do to emotional pain. Yet, short of catastrophic injuries or illnesses, emotional pain often impacts our lives far more than physical pain does.

Here are five reasons emotional pain is worse than physical pain:

Memories- Trigger Emotional Pain but Not Physical Pain

Recalling the time, we broke our leg will not make our leg hurt, but recalling the time we felt rejected by our high-school crush will cause us substantial emotional pain. Our ability to evoke emotional pain by merely remembering distressing events is profound and stands in stark contrast to our total inability to re-experience physical pain.

We Use Physical Pain as a Distraction from Emotional Pain Not Vice Versa

Some teens and adults practice 'cutting' (slicing their flesh superficially with a blade) because the physical pain it evokes distracts them from their emotional pain, thus offering them relief. But the same does not work in reverse, which is why we rarely see a woman choosing to manage the pain of natural childbirth by thinking about her cheating husband. Unfortunately, physical pain seems obvious to others whilst emotional pain is almost secretive in nature. People don't see our broken Heart.

Physical Pain Garner Far More Empathy from Others Than Emotional Pain

When we see a stranger get hit by a car we wince, gasp, or even scream and run to see if they're okay. But when we see a stranger get bullied or taunted we are unlikely to do any of those things. Studies have found that we consistently underestimate other people's emotional pain but not their physical pain. Furthermore, these *empathy gaps* for emotional pain are reduced only if we've experienced a similar emotional pain very recently ourselves.

Emotional Pain Echoes in Ways Physical Pain Does Not

If we got a call about our parent dying while we were holidaying on a cruise, for many years to come, the thought of holidays or cruises would bring up a feeling of sadness. But if we broke our foot playing football we will likely be back on the field as soon as we are fully healed. Physical pain usually leaves very few echoes, unless of course, the circumstance of the injury was emotionally traumatic. While emotional pain leaves numerous reminders, associations and triggers that reactivate our pain whenever we encounter them.

Emotional Pain but Not Physical Pain Can Damage Our Self-Esteem and Long-Term Mental Health:

Physical pain has to be quite extreme to affect our personalities and damage our mental health, but even single episodes of emotional pain can damage our emotional health. For example, failing an exam in college can create anxiety and a fear of failure, a single painful rejection can lead to years of avoidance and loneliness, bullying in school can make us shy and introverted as adults, and a critical boss can damage our self-esteem for years to come.

All these are reasons we should give our emotional health just as much attention and care as we do our physical health. While we take action at the first sight of a sniffle or muscle sprain we do little to 'treat' common emotional injuries such as rejection, failure, guilt, brooding, or loneliness when we sustain them. While we apply antibacterial ointment to a cut or scrape right away we do little to boost or protect our self-esteem when it is low.

According to Dr. Susanne Babbel, a psychologist specialising in trauma and depression suggests "Chronic pain may not only be caused by physical injury but also by stress and emotional issues. Often, physical pain functions to warn a person that there is still emotional work to be done."

It is not only possible, but probable, that the pain we experience in our back, is a generation from our emotional dysfunction.

Dr Christina Peterson writes that *"stress and emotional triggers are common migraine triggers." Our headaches may just be the result of taking on too much in our day-to-day life. Unnecessary stress can be the cause of that thumping in our skull.*

According to Lori D'Ascenzo, Reiki practitioner and expert in kinesiology, *"Our neck is where we hold guilt and self-recrimination." Pain in our neck may mean we are having trouble forgiving ourselves and that we are judging ourselves too harshly.*

Now might be a great time to make a list of all the things we love about ourselves. If we are feeling guilty about something we have done to someone else, now would be the perfect time to apologise and clear the air.

Loving ourselves and finding forgiveness may be the actual keys to this pain in the neck.

Professional kinesiologist Ros Kitson believes that, *“Our shoulders are where we carry our burdens. We talk about ‘shouldering a problem’ and this is exactly what we’re doing when our shoulders tense up and cause us pain.”*

According to self-help author and life coach Ronda Degaust, *“The upper back has to do with feeling the lack of emotional support. We may feel unloved or we may be holding back our love from someone else.” This would probably be a great time to reach out to loved ones and strengthen those relationships.*

Dr. Mark W. Tong says *“Money and financial issues can be tied to back pain.” Similar to the lack of emotional support causing upper back pain, the lack of financial support may be putting unnecessary strain on our lower back.*

Dr. Alan Fogel writes *“All emotions have a motor component.” When it comes to elbow pain, the soreness may have more to do with our own resistance to change than it does to bumping our funny bone. Stiffness in the elbow may mean we are being too stubborn or “stiff” in our daily life.*

WEEK 6

- Communication
- Mindful Meditation – Communication
- Reading & Videos

Communication

If we were to consider all the truly stressful situations in our life, we would probably find that many, if not most, involve other people. This week, we focus on communication and what it means to be mindful in our interactions with others, whether it be family members, co-workers or neighbours. Our focus up until now has been on our internal world (thoughts, feelings and sensations); now we move from the intra-personal to the inter-personal, taking into account another’s world, and the place where their world and ours meet. This means recognising that “the other” (person or persons) have their own perceptions, feelings and needs, which are almost certainly different than ours.

Listening

Most of us don’t really listen very deeply when we are in conversation. As Tara Brach says in **The Sacred Art of Listening**: *“We spend most of our moments when someone is speaking, planning what we’re going to say, evaluating it, trying to come up with our presentation of our self, or controlling the situation. Pure listening is a letting go of control. It’s not easy and takes training... The bottom line is when we are listened to, we feel connected. When we’re not listened to, we feel separate.”*

Dealing with Conflict

Effective communication with those who we disagree with is extraordinarily difficult. If you are like most people, we have a fall-back strategy to deal with conflict that was learned early in life, one that is habitual and embedded in interactions with others.

The three most common strategies are:

Accommodate(“be nice”)

Demand(“me first”)

Withdraw(“I don’t care”)

There is a fourth way, one that involves investigating both our world and the other’s world, that can sometimes yield a surprising and creative solution that honours both worlds. In the martial art, Aikido, this would be called blending, a move that harms neither party and turns conflict into more of a dance than a fight. This is complex and an art form in itself, and forms the basis of Marshall Rosenberg’s Non-Violent Communication (NVC), something that is briefly introduced this week.

“First learn the meaning of what we say, and then speak.” — Epictetus

We could look at the way we speak with one another as the “Art of Communication.”

There are courses taught on this subject, but it seems to be geared towards strengthening public speaking and writing skills, which is great if we are going into public speaking. These courses are basically designed to help us speak from the “best of ourselves and to capture our listeners’ attention.”

Speaking from the “best of oneself” means talking to another person mindfully, which is with awareness, and giving them the attention they deserve, not because we want to “capture our listeners’ attention,” but that we want to “connect” with whomever we are speaking with from a place that is present, kind and respectful for no other reason than that’s how we want to treat them.

When we speak with one another, we have the opportunity to engage with total awareness and recognise the “best of” each other by what we choose to say. Ever noticed when we say something nice or complimentary to someone we are speaking with, how it can actually make them light up, as if we have turned on some kind of a switch for them? The way we can bring out the “best of oneself” is by making a conscious effort to bring out the best in someone else through our communication. This makes communicating less “me-centric,” which is talking to hear ourselves talk, or talking “at” someone rather than “with” them, or being more interested in wanting to “capture” their attention for some kind of pay off. Our daily communication with others — family, friends, and even strangers can become more “artful” by how mindfully we choose our words and sentences.

If we consider communication as an empty canvas to paint with words, think of all of the wonderful and beautiful things we can say to another person. There are approximately 500,000 words in the English language, and supposedly at least 100,000 of them are adjectives, so imagine how creative we could be with how we communicate!

Here’s an exercise you we do to increase, enhance and even strengthen our “art of communication” skills.

Try using some of those adjectives!

- Write down something nice to like to say to someone you know.
- Write down something you may like to say to someone that bothers.
- Read your sentence and ask yourself if you would want this said to you.
- If it’s acceptable to you, keep it as is. If it’s not, rewrite it as you would want to hear it.
- Write down something you’d like to say to someone that you have not had the opportunity to say. It could be someone from your past and you don’t see anymore.
- Read your sentence and ask yourself if you would want this said to you.
- If it’s acceptable to you, keep it as is. If it’s not, rewrite it as you would want to hear it.
- Write down something you’d like to say to someone as if you’re never going to see them again.

- Read your sentence and ask yourself if you would want this said to you.
- If it's acceptable to you, keep it as is. If it's not, rewrite it as you would want to hear it.
- Write down something you'd like to say to yourself, but haven't.
- Read what you wrote and ask yourself if you were honest.
- If you weren't as honest as you can be, rewrite it.
- How does what you wrote make you feel?
- Did you learn something about yourself?
- Do you consider yourself a Mindful communicator?

It's helpful to know that what we say to someone else, might not be what we would want said to us, and that how we talk to ourselves can be how we talk to others, which might not be as mindful as it can be. The "art of communication" requires awareness not only of how we are communicating with another person, but how we also communicate with ourselves.

Remember, our conversations can be like painting a canvas with words. Be masterful!

WEEK 7

- Compassion
- Mindful Meditation – Loving Kindness Meditation
- Reading & Videos

Compassion

In some mindfulness courses, the linkage between mindfulness and compassion is not very explicit. If one were to rely only on a secular definition of mindfulness, which typically emphasises paying close attention to one's own experience and staying in the present moment, an argument could be made that a trained killer could be perfectly mindful, *and be a more effective killer as a result*, with no contradiction to this secular definition. Of course, something seems very wrong with this, since kindness and compassion are at the core of almost every meditative tradition. Moreover, self-kindness may be the most important component of PMSR – it's the oil that makes the gears of mindfulness work. Without it, the practices are dry at best, and harsh and counter-productive at worst.

How do we cultivate compassion? How do we ensure that at the end of the day, it's our kindness and generosity for which we will be remembered? It's a good question, for as much as we all agree that compassion is a virtue to be admired, as a society, we don't seem to be very effective at instilling it. In fact, research by Sarah Konrath at the University of Michigan suggests we're actually getting worse on this score. In reviewing the results of a standard assessment of empathy and compassion taken by 13,000 college students between 1979 and 2009, Konrath discovered that self-reported concern for the welfare of others has been steadily dropping since the early 1990s. According to this analysis, levels of compassion and empathy are lower now than at any time in the past 30 years, and perhaps most alarming, they are declining at an increasing rate.

Since acting compassionately usually means putting others' needs ahead of our own, prompting ourselves to act with kindness often requires not only vigilance but a bit of willpower. That's not to say that relying on religious or philosophical guidance to prompt kindness won't work at times. It will. But any method that depends on constant redirection of selfish urges and top-down monitoring of one's moral code is apt to fail. Perhaps cultivating compassion situationally—so that it automatically emerges at the sight of others in need—would be more fool proof.

Mindful Meditation – Loving Kindness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation involves guided contemplation as a way to focus the mind. It commonly entails sitting in a quiet space for periods ranging from 20 minutes to an hour and learning to guide awareness to the current moment rather than dwell upon what has been or is yet to come. The practice has lately been promoted for its abilities to enhance the brain and heal the body, but many of its most experienced teachers argue that its fundamental purpose involves the soul. As Trungram Gyaltrul Rinpoche, one of the highest lamas in the Tibetan tradition, recently pointed out, meditation's effects on memory, health, and cognitive skills, though positive, were traditionally considered secondary benefits by Buddhist sages. The primary objective of calming the mind and heightening attention was to attain a form of enlightenment that would lead to a deep, abiding compassion and resulting beneficence.

If meditation was indeed capable of fostering compassion—a quality this world seems at times to have in short supply—we need to get in practice.

WEEK 8

- Conclusion
- Developing a Practice of Your Own
- Reading & Videos

Time to reflect...

This brings us to the final week of the course, and if you have been watching the videos, reading the recommended material, and doing the practices, you have accomplished a lot! As a result of your dedicated learning and practice, it's likely that there have been some changes in you since you began, so now might be a good time to ask yourself: What changes have you noticed since you began the course? The changes may be different than you expected and they might not be monumental. They could include subtle shifts, such as discovering that you are sometimes able to find space in the middle of a busy day, or that you are a little more resilient in encounters with others, or you're just a little kinder to yourself in difficult situations. It's often the subtle changes that are actually most profound, because they indicate learning that has been integrated, that they come from the inside-out rather than top-down.

Developing a practice of your own

Although there are videos and readings for this week, there are no practice sheets. Sometimes, we say that the eighth week of an MBSR class starts now but does not really have an end. If this course has been useful for you so far, you may want to consider the question: How will you continue practicing mindfulness in your daily life, on your own? You may decide that you would like to continue the practice in a formal way, incorporating in your schedule a sitting meditation, or you may already have an idea of how you would incorporate into your life one or more of the many informal practices (e.g., simple awareness, mindful eating, STOP, Soften-Soothe-Allow, or PAIN processes).

Of the people who take the PMSR course and have found ways to incorporate mindfulness into their lives, every one of them does it in a unique way, a way that suits their temperament and needs. One person might continue with a 30-minute per day meditation practice, another might take a regular yoga class, another may have made their daily walk into a meditation using present-moment awareness of their inner and outer worlds as they walk, and yet another may intentionally use one or more of the many informal practices throughout their day. The important thing is not the specific practices you choose, but that you make them yours, and that they resonate with you in a way that and that they help you to be more alive, engaged and joyful in your daily life.

