

# Mindful Stress Reduction

## Session 6



**Richard Sears, PsyD, PhD, MBA, ABPP**

[richard@psych-insights.com](mailto:richard@psych-insights.com)

**513-899-6463**

Handouts adapted from Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2013). Copyright by The Guilford Press. Permission to photocopy these handouts is granted to purchasers of this book for personal use only (see copyright page for details).

# Summary of Session 6

## Thoughts Are Not Facts

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

-JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

Our thoughts can have very powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often those thoughts are triggered and run off quite automatically. By becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind and letting go of them as we return our attention to the breath and the moment, it is possible to get some distance and perspective on them. This can allow us to see that there may be other ways to think about situations, freeing us from the tyranny of the old thought patterns that automatically “pop into mind.” Most important, we may eventually come to realize “deep in our bones” that *all thoughts are only mental events* (including the thoughts that say they are not), that *thoughts are not facts*, and that *we are not our thoughts*.

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind; we can “get hold of them,” so that we can look them over from a number of different perspectives, and by becoming very familiar with our own “top 10” habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns, we can more easily become aware of (and change) the processes that may lead us into downward mood spirals.

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that may block or undermine practice, such as “There’s no point in doing this” or “It’s not going to work, so why bother?” Such a pessimistic, hopeless thought pattern is one of the most characteristic features of depressed mood states, and one of the main factors that stop us from taking actions that would help us get out of those states. It follows that it is particularly important to recognize such thoughts as “negative thinking” and not automatically give up on efforts to apply skillful means to change the way we feel.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences.

In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.

-JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

# Ways You Can See Your Thoughts Differently

Here are some of the things you can do with your thoughts:

1. Just watch them come in and leave, without feeling that you have to follow them.
2. See if it is possible to notice the feelings that give rise to the thoughts: the “context” in which your thoughts are but one link in a chain of events.
3. View your thought as a mental event rather than a fact. It may be true that this event often occurs with other feelings. It is tempting to think of it as being true, but it is still up to you to decide whether it is true and how you want to deal with it.
4. Write your thoughts down on paper. This lets you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down can give you a moment to respond to it differently.
5. For particularly difficult thoughts, it may be helpful to take another look at them intentionally, in a balanced, open state of mind, as part of your sitting practice. Let your “wise mind” give its perspective, perhaps labeling the feeling out of which, it arises, and holding a sense of curiosity, as best you can: “Ah, here is sadness”; “Here is the voice of depression”; “Here is the familiar harsh and critical voice.” *The keynote attitude to take with your thoughts is gentle interest and curiosity.*

Based in part on Fennell.

## Prevention

What are your warning signals that you are getting stressed out or overwhelmed (e.g., becoming irritable; decreased social contact—just “not wanting to see people”; changes in sleeping habits; changes in eating habits; getting easily exhausted; giving up on exercise; not wanting to deal with business, such as opening mail, paying bills; postponing deadlines)?

Set up an Early Warning System—write down on the next worksheet the changes that you should look out for (if it feels comfortable, include *those with whom you share your life* in a collaborative effort to *notice* and then to *respond* rather than to *react* to these signs).

# Working Wisely with Stress – Part 1

## SEEING CLEARLY (NOTICING THE FIRST SIGNS)

This worksheet offers an opportunity to increase your awareness of what happens for you when you begin to get overwhelmed. The aim is, carefully and with curiosity, to investigate the thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and patterns of behavior that tell you that you are starting to get overwhelmed.

### **What are your triggers?**

- Triggers can be external (things that happen to you) or internal (e.g., thoughts, feelings, memories, concerns).
- Look out for small triggers as well as large ones—sometimes something that appears quite trivial can spark a downward stress spiral.

### **What sort of thoughts run through your mind when you first feel yourself getting overwhelmed?**

### **What emotions arise?**

**What happens in your body?**

**What do you do, or feel like doing?**

**Are there any old habits of thinking or behavior that might unwittingly keep you stuck in the feelings of being overwhelmed (e.g., ruminating, trying to suppress or turn away from painful thoughts and feelings, struggling with it instead of accepting and exploring it)?**

## Stepping Back from Thought

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not “you” or “reality.” For instance, if you have the thought that you must get a certain number of things done today and you don’t recognize it as a thought but act as if it’s “the truth,” then you have created in that moment a reality in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

One patient, Peter, who’d had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realization of this one night, when he found himself washing his car at 10 o’clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn’t have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today because he was already so completely caught up in believing it.

If you find yourself behaving in similar ways, it is likely that you will also feel driven, tense, and anxious without even knowing why, just as Peter did. So if the thought of how much you have to get done today comes up while you are meditating, you will have to be very attentive to it as a thought or you may be up and doing things before you know it, without any awareness that you decided to stop sitting simply because a thought came through your mind.

On the other hand, when such a thought comes up, if you are able to step back from it and see it clearly, then you will be able to prioritize things and make sensible decisions about what really does need doing. You will know when to call it quits during the day. So the simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

This liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself. When we spend some time each day in a state of nondoing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body, without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand. As the mind develops stability and is less caught up in the content of thinking, we strengthen the mind’s ability to concentrate and to be calm. And if each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content, and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of its content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are.

# The Train of Associations

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we all spend much or most of our lives there. But meditation is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Because meditation is not thought, through the continuous process of silent observation, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts, struggle against them, or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen.

When we lose ourselves in thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps the mind and carries it away, and, in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop on a train of association, not knowing that we have done so, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line, we may wake up and realize that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them but then vanish upon inspection.

But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, and then, all of a sudden—whoosh! We are gone, lost in a thought. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, so that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we unknowingly give to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and their impact on our lives, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arise and pass, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind; we can see our thoughts as the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.

## Home Practice Following Session 6

1. Choose which mindfulness exercises you'd like to practice for the coming week, and do one each day. Note what you did and any observations on the Home Practice Record form.
2. 3-Minute Breathing Space - Regular: Practice three times a day, at the times that you have decided in advance. You can follow along on track 4 of the CD or do it on your own. Record each time you do it by circling the number on the home practice form; note any comments/difficulties.
3. 3-Minute Breathing Space - Responsive: Practice *whenever you notice unpleasant feelings*. Record each time you do it by making a tick mark on the home practice form; note any comments/difficulties. If negative thoughts are still around after the breathing space, you might like to use some of the ideas above under "Ways You Can See Your Thoughts Differently" to get a different perspective on these thoughts.
4. Complete the Working Wisely with Stress – Part 1 handout. Please include family members and friends, if you like. They may also notice early warning signs if you are getting overwhelmed.



## Week 6 – Home Practice Record Form

Record on the Home Practice Record Form each time you practice. Also, make a note of anything that comes up in the home practice, so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.

| Day       | Meditation<br>(note<br>which one<br>you did) | 3-Minute<br>Breathing<br>Space-<br>Regular | 3-Minute Breathing<br>Space-Responsive.<br>Place tick mark for each<br>time done | Comments |
|-----------|--|--|--|----------|
| Monday    | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |
| Tuesday   | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |
| Wednesday | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |
| Thursday  | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |
| Friday    | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |
| Saturday  | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |
| Sunday    | Y or N                                       | 1<br>2<br>3                                |  |          |