

## Session 2: Responding Skilfully, Responding Kindly

### Anxiety: Reactive Autopilot vs Responding Skilfully

In session 1 we explored the Autopilot, and how a wandering mind influences mood and behaviour. In anxiety, the Autopilot is important because it is in this mode of mind that many of our Cognitive Distortions, our habitual patterns of negative thought and our judgements, exist and thrive.

When we find ourselves in an anxiety provoking situation or experiencing negative thoughts our amygdala (the part of the brain that controls our stress response) kicks in and starts sending out warning signals to the body.

An issue with managing stress and anxiety is that the amygdala can be triggered by thoughts and perceptions of threat rather than actual threat, meaning we can trigger it regularly, especially when caught up in the Autopilot. When triggered, the body goes into protection mode, the heart beats faster, we breathe faster, our muscles get tense, and we may feel dizzy and uneasy. The body is in **fight-or-flight mode**, and this feeds anxiety.

Our coping strategies at times of anxiety are routinely habitual. We have used them for so long they have become automatic, we do them without even realising. Often our response is to resist the experience. We try to think our way out of anxiety, to distract ourselves and generally struggle. This is an understandable response but in the long run this resistance of our experience is ineffective and can serve to strengthen anxiety's impact upon us.

*"What we resist persists"*

*- Rob Nairn*

Instead of resisting our experience, we look at ways of undercutting these automatic patterns. Building on the awareness of mindfulness we looked at in Session 1, the next step is to begin to respond **skilfully** at times of overwhelm.

**Responding Skilfully** means:

- Bringing acceptance to the feelings and experiences of anxiety rather than resisting or struggling.
- Choosing a response that will best help manage anxiety
- Looking at ways to ride out the waves of anxiety as they arise in the short term
- Developing Resilience to anxiety and its triggers in the long term
- Letting go of our automatic reactive patterns when we notice them.

Responding Skilfully: Grounding.

**Grounding** is skilful practice that stabilises attention at times of heightened stress and anxiety. It involves focusing on something tangible – physical sensations, an object or our own senses - in the present moment and using this as an anchor point for attention.

This allows for disengaging from our habitual thought patterns and cognitive distortions that fuel anxiety. When the mind is racing, instead of worrying about what might come or what has already



happened, grounding brings you back to the present moment, “what is” rather than the endless “what if’s” of the mind.

The practice of grounding can be used to give us **options** at times of overwhelm:

- **Relief** – as a refuge where we can gather our attention and ride out the sensations of anxiety
- **Building Resilience** – giving us a firmer ground on which to explore our experience of anxiety.

There are many ways of practicing grounding.

- **3-Points Practice:** This short meditation is a structured physical grounding practice. Using the sensations of contact points to keep the mind steady.
- **Grounding Object:** This can be any object but ideally something small and textured that you can carry around with you (stone, gem, piece of fabric, pen cap etc) that can be used to ground our focus in challenging moments
- **Mindful Walking:** An informal mindfulness practice that can be done indoors or outdoors. We ground attention on the sensations of the feet on the floor as we walk and the sensations all around us (sound, sight, touch).
- **Fingertip Breath:** This simple but effective grounding technique combines rhythmic breathing and sensations of touch. As you breath in slowly touch your thumb to the tip of each finger in turn (little, ring, middle and index). As you breath out slowly touch the thumb to the tip of each finger in the reverse order (index, middle, ring and little).
- **Sensory Awareness:** When stressed, engage with your environment and ground yourself in what is accessible through the senses. Look for 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel the texture of, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. After you have been through, breathe for a few moments and then return to the day
- **Grounding/Compassionate Phrase:** I am present, I am here, I can hear the sound of..., may I respond with kindness, I can support myself, I am riding out a wave. Say the phrase a few times, give it your full attention and use soothing rhythm breathing as you do

Remember Grounding benefits from regular practice so make time to use the techniques and familiarise yourself with them, not just at times of overwhelm. Practice, practice, practice!

### Responding Kindly: Self-Compassion

*“Self-Compassion is understanding difficulties and being kind and warm in the face of setback rather than harshly judgemental”*

*- Professor Paul Gilbert*

At the heart of this approach to Facing Anxiety and Flourishing is the idea that anxiety, rather than being an enemy to be defeated, is a part of us, something in our experience that is crying out for attention and kindness. Whilst we might want to push anxiety away, this is ultimately unsuccessful as anxiety is internal and we cannot outrun ourselves.

An alternative, more skilful approach is to meet our anxiety with kindness, understanding and empathy.

Self-Compassion is a key component in Responding Kindly (and skilfully!) to anxiety. Self-Compassion is a discipline and series of practices that is used in Mindfulness, Compassionate Mind Training and a



version of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy called Compassion-Focused Therapy to help people respond to challenges and difficulties in a more skilful and less judgemental manner.

Self-Compassion is:

- A multi-faceted and honest approach to responding to stress, suffering and difficulty
- Offering the kindness and support you give to others to ourselves when we face difficulty.
- Responding with kindness and understanding, rather than self-criticism, to our experiences, perceived short-comings and setbacks.

Self-Compassion is not:

- Self-Indulgent, soft or the easy option
- Positive thinking and pretending everything is ok
- Passivity or just giving up on change.

Self-Compassion is tender but is rooted in strength and helps us develop resilience. Rather than criticising ourselves or becoming frustrated for feeling anxious, instead we respond with kindness and the same care you would offer someone else who was suffering and needed attention.

### Practicing Compassion: Soothing Rhythm Breathing

When we practice self-compassion, we help stimulate the **parasympathetic nervous system**, the part of our emotional regulation system that helps soothe the stress response. It also stimulates our “Soothing System” and aids the release of the hormone **oxytocin**, that helps us feel calm and connected. Soothing Rhythm Breathing is a practice that helps us experience self-care and self-compassion.

1. Find a comfy posture on a chair, sofa or cushion. Choose whether to have your eyes open or closed. Become aware of the fact that you are breathing.
2. Gradually begin to purposely slow and deepen the breath. We are trying to find a rhythm that feels soothing. We want the in-breath and the out-breath to be roughly the same duration. If it helps establish this, you can also count inwardly to 3 or 4 on the in-breath and to 3 or 4 on the out-breath
3. Allow the breath to settle into this rhythm and just pay attention to the sensations of the breath and how you feel breathing in this manner.
4. When you feel ready allow the breath to return to its normal pace, open the eyes if they have been closed, and allow the practice to come to its end.

This practice can be done as a **formal practice** where we do this for between 5 and 15 minutes (or longer if you like!) or as a shorter **informal practice** that can be used skilfully to respond at times of overwhelm or when we feel the sensations of anxiety beginning to build.

*Gratitude, the experience of what is good in one's life, is a powerful and direct antidote to thoughts and feelings of being threatened*

*- Dr Rick Hanson*

Gratitude is another facet our approach, one that helps create a sense of balance in our outlook.

When we experience anxiety, it can be easy to be drawn into rumination and aversive emotions that colour our outlook on life. Gratitude helps us establish an important and sustainable sense of balance to counter the tendency for anxiety to pull our mood and behaviour downwards.

It is important to recognise that Gratitude does not mean **positive thinking** but a genuine interest and appreciation of the good in our life.

### **Nourishing Activities**

A practical exercise that combines kindness and gratitude.

Make a list of activities you find nourishing.

- Pleasure (reading, watching tv, listening to music, eating favourite food, having a hot bath etc)
- Explorative (exercise, yoga, meditation, exploring nature)
- Give a sense of achievement (those tasks we put off)

Schedule these activities into your week (try for at least one a day). Be present for the activity as you practice it, be mindful of how you feel in this small act of compassion for yourself. Afterwards try a little reflection and see if you can bring gratitude for taking time for yourself.

### **Gratitude Diary**

The gratitude diary is a way of consciously training ourselves to be more aware of that in our life, big moments and especially the small moments, that bring us a sense of contentment, joy and happiness.

At the end of the day, record **three things** that you were grateful for that day. Notice how you feel reflecting upon them. Do this daily to build momentum.

The combination of Nourishing Activities and the Gratitude Diary are the first steps in supporting ourselves, putting our needs first and developing gratitude and appreciation in our life.

### **Home Practice**

#### **Formal Practice**

- Daily Mindfulness Meditation (10 or 20 min) and Soothing Rhythm Breathing (10 – 15 min) on alternate days

#### **Informal Practice**

- 3 Points Practice at least twice a day and if you want to try it at times of low stress/anxiety

#### **Practical Practice**

- Daily Gratitude Diary – Note 3 things a day you are grateful for.
- Nourishing Activities (can include practical ideas from session 1) create list and start scheduling them
- Continue to note Cognitive Distortions