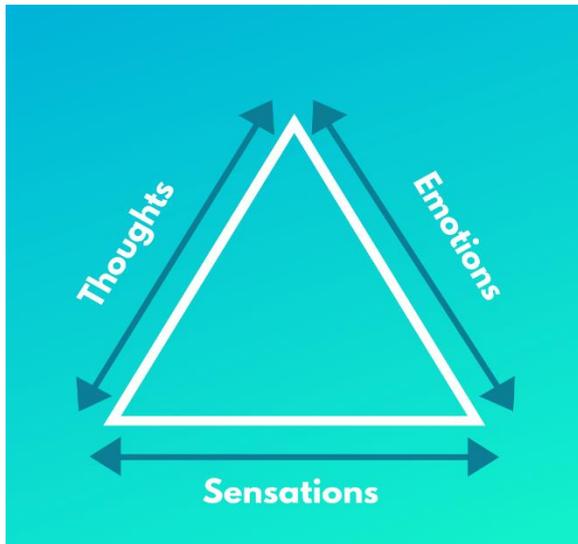


Session 3: Thoughts, Facts and Cognitive Distortions

Stepping off the Treadmill: Thoughts, Perceptions and Anxiety

In session 3 we are beginning to explore a wider approach to facing our anxiety, building on the skills and techniques already introduced and beginning to apply them directly to different facets of the experience of anxiety. We are starting to separate out the experience of anxiety into different strands, and looking at how we meet them skilfully, allowing us to tolerate, experience and then flourish even when anxiety appears.

Of central importance is exploring how we experience, perceive and interact with our own thought processes. This course is underpinned by the CBT Theory of thought, and how the meaning we give our thoughts and experiences is what helps shape and determine our mood and behaviour. Our thoughts shape our sensations and emotions and they influence our thoughts and reactions.



Learning to respond skilfully and compassionately to our experience and how we interpret it is key to helping us change our habitual patterns and take back agency and choice when anxiety arises.

At the heart of this is a different perspective on our thoughts.

The ABC Model

“Don’t Believe Everything that you think. Thoughts are just that – thoughts”

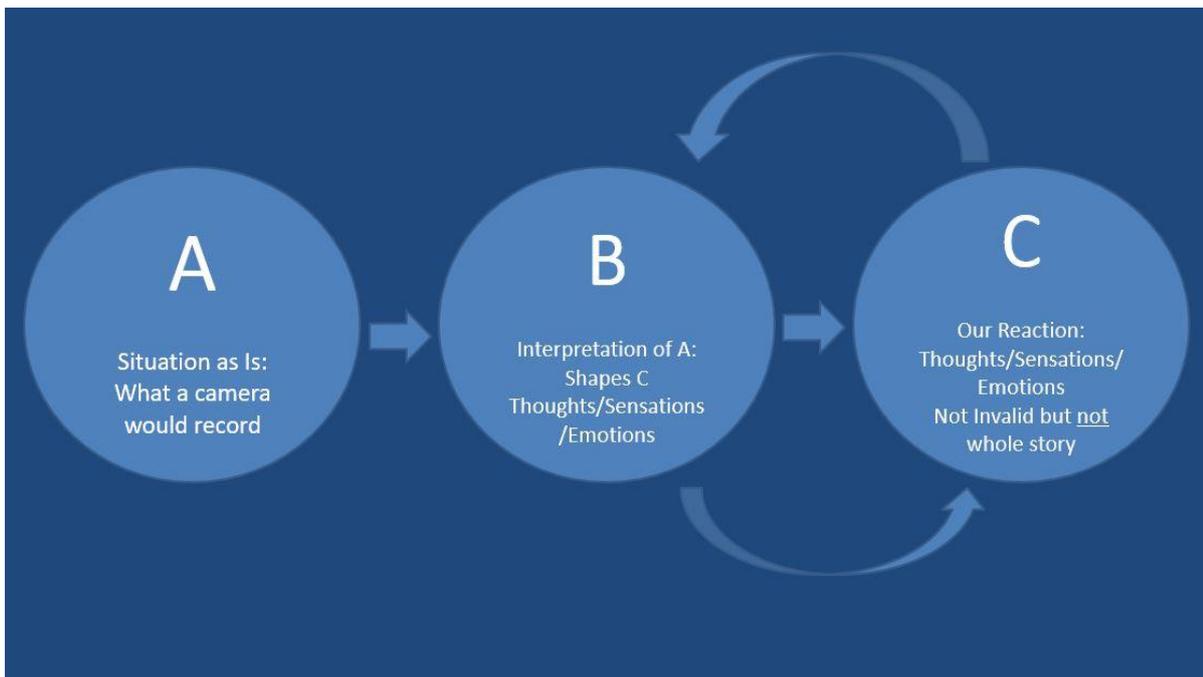
- Allan Lokos

Mark Williams, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University, describes our thoughts as “propaganda”. Like propaganda, our thoughts are sometimes true, sometimes untrue and sometimes have a kernel of truth wrapped up in analysis, judgement, projection and myth. However, for the most part we do not see thoughts like this, we just believe them, consciously and subconsciously.

What he says is important in understanding and relating to thoughts is that we start to see them not as “truth” but as interpretations of experience. Once we see them in this less concrete way, we can begin to change our relationship to them.

This change in perspective on thought can be best described through the ABC model.

This means observing our thoughts, being aware of them mindfully, seeing them as “cognitive events” in the same way that physical sensations are “physical events” and sounds are “aural events”. We begin to see thoughts as interpretation of experience rather than facts, slowly changing how we interact and respond to them



A: Is the situation as is, as a camera would record the facts. This is without interpretation, inherently neutral. We often see **A** as being the sole influence on **C**.

B: Is our interpretation of A. The experience is filtered through our previous experiences, thought processes and habitual patterns. This process is often not seen but it shapes **C**, how we react. It is in **B** that our **cognitive distortions** reside and thrive.

It is this aspect of how thoughts, emotions and sensations interact that is key in learning to relate differently to our thoughts and experiences

C: Our Reaction. Thoughts, sensations and Emotions in response to **A and B**. However, we are often unaware of the role of **B**, our interpretation, has had on our experience.

Furthermore, once we reach **C**, our reaction, this too can then be filtered back through **B**, our habitual thought patterns, and this can increase our reactivity. This can fuel **stress-reaction loops**, where our interpretation of the situation and our experience **sustain anxiety**.

A simple illustration of this is to think of exercise we did in session where a friend did not return our wave. There can be multiple reasons why the friend did not wave back and acknowledge you in that scenario. Our reaction though will have been shaped by our interpretation. If we see that act though Cognitive Distortions such as “why do people ignore me?”, “what have I done to upset them?”, “how



dare they ignore me” or other negative interpretations, it is more likely to lead to an anxious reaction. Once anxious, our interpretation and thinking skew towards validating this response, and this can trigger more unease, and the physical symptoms, thoughts and emotions that we associate with anxiety.

With the ABC model and mindfulness, we are attempting to get to better understand and observe those habitual thoughts and cognitive distortions that feed anxiety and let them go. This process gradually loosens the habits that sustain anxiety, freeing us from those reactive patterns.

Labelling

To further develop awareness of the parts of our experience that sustain anxiety, we are introducing “Labelling” to your experiential practices. Labelling is a way of becoming aware of your thought patterns, especially your cognitive distortions, and choosing to let them go.

We can label thoughts, but also sensations and emotions as they arise in the moment. This labelling is not an attempt to get rid of them, but to be more consciously aware and to create space between them arising and us reacting. It is in that space that choice resides, and it is in that space that we can make decisions that loosen the grip of behaviours that sustain anxiety.

During your “Daily Meditation” and “Be Kind to Yourself” practices this week, when the mind wanders, I want you to label what you are aware of:

- 1. Label the thought (i.e., worry/daydream/judgement/anxious thought/happy thought/fearful thought/future thought/past thought/etc)**

As we are focusing on thoughts, at this point you can refocus on the practice. If, however you want to expand the practice of labelling, after you have labelled the thought, you can try labelling two more aspects of your experience:

- 2. Label any sensations in the body at that moment**
- 3. Label any emotional tone present in the body at that moment**

It does not matter if you always label all 3, the sensations and emotions can be subtle, but endeavour to label the thought each time your mind wanders.

See if you notice any patterns, themes or negative thoughts associated with cognitive distortions.

This approach to thoughts and their physical and emotional impact is a way of unravelling the experiences so they seem less solid. It changes our engagement and perspective on experience, making us more aware and less likely to be drawn into reactive patterns that sustain anxiety.

Self-Compassion for the Anxious Self

“Having compassion starts and ends with having compassion for all those unwanted parts of ourselves, all those imperfections we do not want to look at”

- Pema Chodron

In the previous session we introduced self-compassion as an approach to helping us manage anxiety and bring about emotional balance. Building on this we now bring self-compassion to our experience of anxiety, to the part of us that suffers, cognitively, physically and emotionally.



Ironically, when we are suffering anxiety, when we most need to be compassionate towards ourselves, our response is often anything but compassionate. When we rail against the anxiety, we can become frustrated and even harshly critical of ourselves simply for experiencing anxiety. This reaction can deepen and sustain feelings of anxiety as we are no longer simply anxious, we are fighting against that reality.

Instead, we are suggesting a different approach. Start to see the sensations, thoughts and emotions of anxiety as part of us, something calling out for attention and compassion. Our suffering is real, but we do not change this through resistance. It takes honesty, courage and tenderness – all components of self-compassion.

The **“Be Kind to Yourself”** practice is a way of responding skilfully to your struggles and anxieties. It is like putting a supportive arm around ourselves and looking at how we can support ourselves through these difficulties. It encourages us to bring understanding and compassion to our own experience.

Facing our anxieties this way may be daunting, but it is through gently learning to be with, tolerate and be compassionate towards our suffering that we develop the resilience that allows us to face anxiety and flourish.

Self-Compassion for Anxiety in the Moment

There is a short version of the Be Kind to Yourself Practice that can be used in the moment when you feel stressed, overwhelmed and anxious and one that uses labelling also.

1. When you feel stressed, choose to pause and focus on the breathing. Slow and deepen the breath if that feels comfortable
2. After a few breaths say inwardly to yourself **“This is a moment of stress/anxiety/difficulty”** (whatever word works for you).
3. Stay with the breath for a few more moments and then say inwardly **“stress/anxiety/difficulty are part of life”**
4. Finally, as you continue to focus and breathe, offer yourself a self-compassion phrase such as **“may I support myself”, “may I be resilient”, “may I go with ease”**

This short intervention is not designed to suppress stress or anxiety, but to give us room to respond skilfully and kindly to our experience, letting go of reactive patterns that would sustain and deepen the anxiety.

Home Practice

Formal Practice

- Daily Mindfulness Meditation & Be Kind to Yourself on alternate days

Informal Practice

- 3 Points Practice at least twice a day/Self-Compassion for Anxiety in the Moment

Practical Practice

- Daily Gratitude Diary and Scheduling Nourishing Activities