

Session 4: Sustain, Build and Flourish

The Onward Journey

The Facing Anxiety and Flourishing course aims to help change how we perceive anxiety. The practices and underlying approach shift our perspective away from viewing anxiety as something to avoid and towards learning how to meet anxiety with courage, skill and resilience. The course gives the practitioner the knowledge and experiential skills to radically alter their relationship with anxiety and to learn to flourish in the face of the challenges of life.

“Life doesn’t get easier or more forgiving, we get stronger and more resilient”

- Steve Maraboli

The final session of the course acts as a pivot into your continuing journey. Over the course a variety of approaches, techniques and experiential practices have been introduced, allowing you to weave a strong tapestry of response to help manage your anxiety. Rather than seeing this session as marking the end of something, it is to be seen as a step further towards flourishing in the face of anxiety.

The course invests you with the skills needed and invites you to look at sustaining the changes already made and building upon them in the days, weeks months and years ahead. This course is not a quick fix, but a robust and ongoing approach to anxiety and life that allows the practitioner to be more empathetic, compassionate and resilient – to flourish - when meeting the challenges that trigger our anxiety.

Action Plan for Anxiety

Key to helping sustain and build on the work already done is to have a structure around which we can continue to develop our practices. This structure, that we call the “**Action Plan for Anxiety**”, will help keep you on track, guiding practice and helping meet setbacks. The Action Plan will be individual and changes over time, but there are key aspects to include:

Commitment to Practice

The skills needed to face anxiety and flourish are developed experientially, through the practices highlighted in this course. It is through these practices that we can gain a greater understanding of our habitual patterns especially those that trigger, sustain and exacerbate anxiety and learn to relate to them differently.

The suggestion is to plan for regular practice. Make it realistic and able to fit into your life but aim to have a regular **Formal Practice**, perhaps every day, perhaps several times a week. It does take commitment, but the regularity will help sustain and build your resilience.

On days where **Formal Practice** is not possible, then using the **Informal Practices** more regularly.

It can be helpful to find groups where we can do these practices together (online and in person when allowed)

Formal Practices

- Daily Mindfulness (including “Labelling” Thoughts, Sensations and Emotions)
- Soothing Rhythm Breathing
- Be Kind to Yourself

You can also experiment with other formal practices such as the **Bodyscan Meditation**, **Mindful Listening Meditation** and **Reducing Stress** as a way of training the mind to be more focused and settled

Informal Practices

- 3 Points Practice
- Other Grounding Techniques
- Self-Compassion for Anxiety in the Moment

Continue to Note Cognitive Distortions

The role of thought, especially cognitive distortions, and how we relate to them, is central to this approach. During the Formal and Informal Experiential practices we learn to observe and label our thoughts, changing our relationship with them.

Being able to notice our own cognitive distortions and the storylines they spin in our mind is an important component of managing the triggers of anxiety.

When you find yourself in stressful and anxiety provoking situations, **pause** and ask yourself “**what am I thinking?**”. Writing them down can also help remind us of these tenacious thought patterns, allow us to recognise them when they arise and loosen their hold over our behaviour.

Plan for Setbacks

This course is all about developing new perspectives and new approaches and implicit in that is the recognition that this is a journey. As with any journey, there will be challenges, difficulties and setbacks so it is important to bring acceptance to these challenges and look at ways of supporting ourselves through them.

This can be stepping up **Formal** and **Informal Practice** in a period leading up to a challenging situation that you know will be coming (personal or professional), helping build our resilience.

Planning for unforeseen setbacks is also possible. Whilst we cannot foresee the actual events, we can practice **responding to difficulties with compassion rather than self-criticism**, creating that habit so we are more likely to call upon it when anxiety arises.

We can also try and put support in place for when we need it. This might be having someone we can confide in when we feel the sense of overwhelm.

Practical Tips

Exercise

Regular exercise boosts serotonin, dopamine and releases endorphins that help boost and regulate our moods.

Sleep

Healthy sleep is a key aid for managing anxiety, but often anxiety impacts our ability to fall asleep and can cause broken sleep. There are a few practical things you can do to help boost healthy sleep



Turn off all devices at least an hour before sleep. Blue Light suppresses the production of Melatonin that is needed for sleep. Switching off all devices reduces this impact, increasing chances of healthy sleep.

Reduce the intake of caffeine, refined carbohydrates and alcohol (or experiment with cutting them out altogether if sleep is a real issue)

Practice gentle stretching, relaxation techniques or meditation in the lead up to bed to help settle the mind and body.

Nourishing Activities

Plan for and schedule activities that nourish us. This includes activities, large and small, that give us a sense of happiness, joy, contentment and boost our mood. Nourishing Activities can be seen as things that give pleasure, are explorative or give a sense of achievement.

- **Pleasure** (Rest, listen to music, reading, watching your favourite TV programme, enjoying a favourite food, having a hot bath etc.)
- **Explorative** (Exercise, spending time outside, meditation, yoga, time in nature)
- **Sense of Achievement** (tasks that you put off, personally and professionally)

These activities establish a sense of balance and are essential for our mental and physical wellbeing. A lack of balance between tasks that nourish us and tasks that deplete us can lead to increased fatigue, stress, irritability, exhaustion, burnout and anxiety.

Gratitude

Continue to keep a gratitude diary. How often you do this is an individual choice, but a daily practice can be really helpful although you may prefer to reflect on gratitude a few times a week. This practice helps incline the mind towards recognising those moments of gratitude, big and small, that we can easily miss in the busyness of our lives. This balance is a key part in helping us meet anxiety and the negative thought patterns that permeate those times

Gratitude for the Whole-Self

This final practice is a way of taking a more empathetic and balanced attitude towards ourselves. When we feel anxious it is easy to get caught up in self-criticism and despondency. We tend to focus on that which is uncomfortable in the moment, the unhelpful thoughts and unpleasant emotions and sensations, and this can keep us locked into reactive cycles that feed anxiety.

Gratitude for the Whole-Self is a conscious shifting of perspective, towards recognising and embracing our whole experience and recognising we can be grateful for this self. Rather than being Positive Thinking which ignores our realities, it is simply a gentle noticing and sense of thankfulness for the mind and body we have. This gives us a wider perspective on our moment-to-moment experience rather than simply those aspects related to anxiety and unease.

You can spend as little as a few minutes on this practice or extend it to a lengthy formal exercise – its an adaptable practice that shifts with your needs and realities.

1. Start by finding a comfortable position. Close your eyes if this feels comfortable and focus on the breath for a few moments.



2. Next be curious and ask yourself “How am I feeling” and simply mentally “label” that pattern of emotions.
3. As you continue to breathe, bring different aspects of your body and mind into focus and reflect on why you are grateful for them (examples below but make the practice your own)

Heart and Lungs – Grateful for keeping me alive

Muscles and Frame – Grateful for giving me the strength and dexterity to move, run, dance, play and to connect with and hold others

Senses – Grateful for allowing me to engage with the richness and variety of life. To take in beautiful sites, to notice pleasing aromas, to hear music and the voices of our loved ones, to taste food and to be able to connect with life through touch and contact

Brain – Grateful for how it regulates all my experience, allows me to think and plan, create and care.

Body – end by bringing gratitude to the whole body

4. End the practice by focusing on the breath for a few moments.

In the coming days, weeks and months remember that you are building and sustaining a new approach to anxiety. You are getting to know it, to understand it and to relate to it differently. You have a variety of different approaches and I encourage you to keep trying, to gain confidence and resilience and to flourish!

“You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf”

- Jon Kabat-Zinn

Further Reading

Full Catastrophe Living – Jon Kabat-Zinn

The Compassionate Mind – Professor Paul Gilbert

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion – Professor Christopher K. Germer

Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom – Rick Hanson

Awakening Joy – James Baraz