



INSTITUTE  
*for* LIVING  
*Courageously*

AN 8-WEEK MINDFULNESS TRAINING

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# Session 4

Acceptance

# UNPLEASANT SITUATIONS

In our daily lives, we encounter various pleasant experiences – we may receive a kind email from an old friend, have a delightful conversation with a colleague or receive a nice compliment. However, less pleasant or even distressing events are part of our daily experience as well, for instance, we get stuck in a traffic jam, have a dispute with a colleague, or must complete a task we don't feel like doing. It is undeniable that life brings about both pleasant and unpleasant experiences.



**UNPLEASANT  
EXPERIENCES, LIKE  
GETTING CAUGHT IN  
A TRAFFIC JAM ARE  
PART OF DAILY LIFE.**

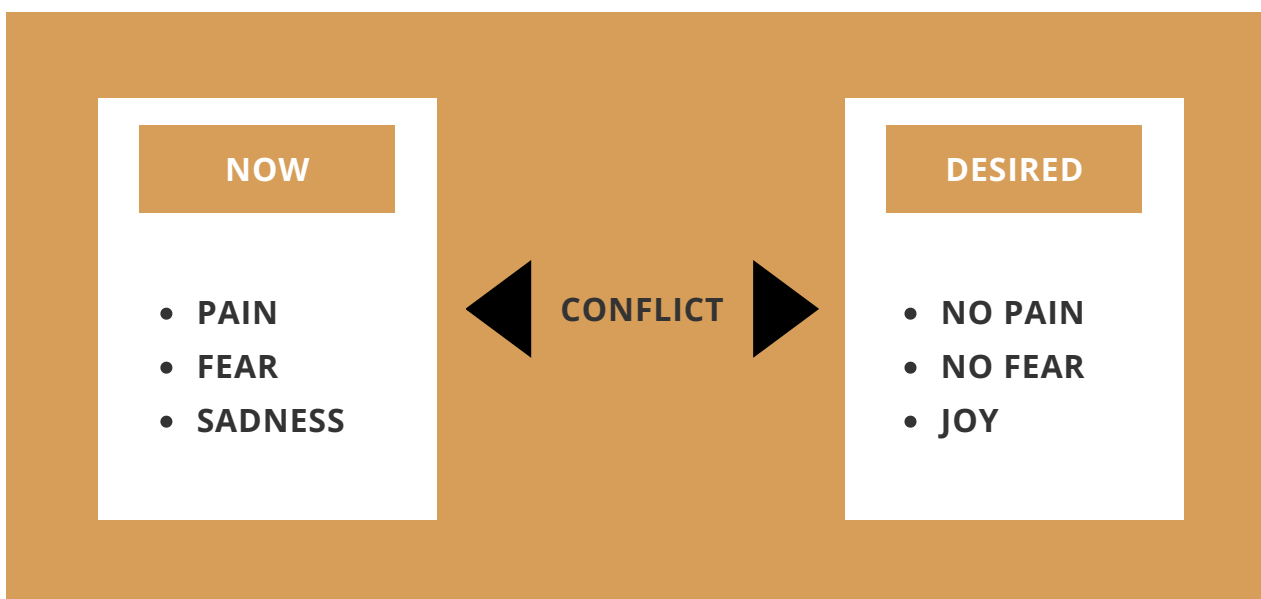
Although both pleasant and unpleasant experiences are an inevitable part of our daily life, we employ different strategies to deal with them. In general, we strive to avoid distressing or unpleasant experiences as much possible. In contrast, when it comes to pleasant experiences, we gladly embrace them and try to hold on to them as tightly as we can. Due to the nature of these different strategies, we inevitably experience internal conflicts and struggles.

Sooner or later, distressing experiences take place. These may vary from relatively small events, such as forgetting an appointment, to more intense distress, such as the death of a loved one. We frequently try to forget these types of situations and the feelings that go along with them, or we try to get over them as fast as we can. We often avoid the unpleasant situation and associated feelings.

# UNPLEASANT SITUATIONS

Since we would often rather get rid of unpleasant situations and feelings, which are difficult for us to accept, this more or less immediately results in a struggle or conflict. We're conflicted between how things are now (unwanted/ bad) and how things should be (wanted/good) (see Fig. 1). Creating this conflict makes it even more difficult to deal with the situation. After all, the situation did take place and the feeling is there, yet we do not wish for this to be part of our reality. The question is what hurts more, the event and the emotion triggered by the event or the internal struggle we experience?

*Fig. 1 A created conflict between the current situation and the wanted situation*



# THE CONSEQUENCES OF RESISTANCE

The research shows that resistance and struggle have consequences. Actively trying to diminish or control an experience requires energy. For example, when we try not to experience an emotion by suppressing it, we lose energy. The energy we consume is no longer available for other activities. This phenomenon, called ego depletion, has been demonstrated in more than 80 studies.

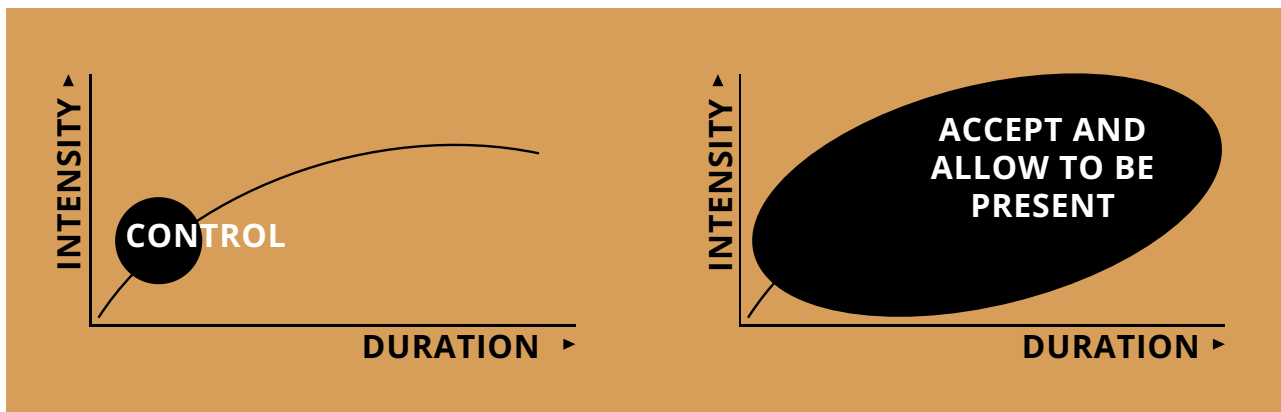
Moreover, the more we struggle against a feeling or a situation, the longer this struggle lasts. We try everything and anything to win the battle. We suppress the feeling and pretend it's not there. When we don't allow feelings or thoughts to be there, the focus on that very feeling or thought inevitably increases.

The aftereffect means that the feeling won't go away but will be triggered repeatedly. If we resist a certain feeling, it will continue to exist. By constantly struggling and fighting, the conflict is preserved, that is, "What you resist persists."

## MINDFULNESS AND UNPLEASANT SITUATIONS

Acceptance plays an important role in mindfulness. Rather than trying to avoid or control an experience, mindfulness involves allowing experiences to be present and take their natural course (see Fig. 2). Every feeling and every thought is permitted to be there, after all, the thoughts and feelings are there anyway. Mindfulness teaches us not to struggle with feelings or thoughts. Allowing and accepting are central concepts in mindfulness.

*Fig.2 Intervening by trying to control versus accept an experience*



By giving up the struggle against feelings and thoughts, we not only save energy, but also experience the natural course of emotions and feelings and watch them fade away all by themselves. After all, they are only temporary. When we accept and allow them to take their natural course, we notice that the feelings and emotions become less intense, and they may even go away faster than we struggle and fight them.

Mindfulness teaches us to focus attention on experiences without judging them (see Fig 3). We no longer refer to experiences as good or bad; instead, we accept them for what they are. When an emotion is allowed to persist, one can experience the temporary nature of the emotion, as it will come and go by itself. Allowing experiences to take their natural course can help us liberate ourselves from emotions, feelings, or thoughts. In such case, one becomes an observer of rather than a participant in the feeling.

# MINDFULNESS AND UNPLEASANT SITUATIONS

*Fig.3 Mindfully dealing with the current situation*



## PLEASANT SITUATIONS

Usually, we have much less trouble dealing with pleasant situations and events. Yet, conflict can even arise from pleasant experiences when we try to hold on to them. Negative as well as positive emotions come and go. The realization that even positive experiences eventually disappear can cause us to try and hold on to things that are temporary in nature. This attachment causes conflict. A conflict between how things are now (pleasant/nice) and how things will be at some future point in time (neutral/unpleasant) (see Fig. 4).

We realize that the happy feeling we experience now (going out for dinner with a friend) will be over tomorrow (because we'll have to get back to work). Because of this realization, we might feel the urge to hold on to the pleasant feeling. The paradox here is that by trying to hold on to the pleasant feeling, we seem to enjoy the moment less. We get caught up in our thoughts and instead of enjoying the moment for as long as it lasts, we try to prolong the happy feeling and not think about tomorrow.

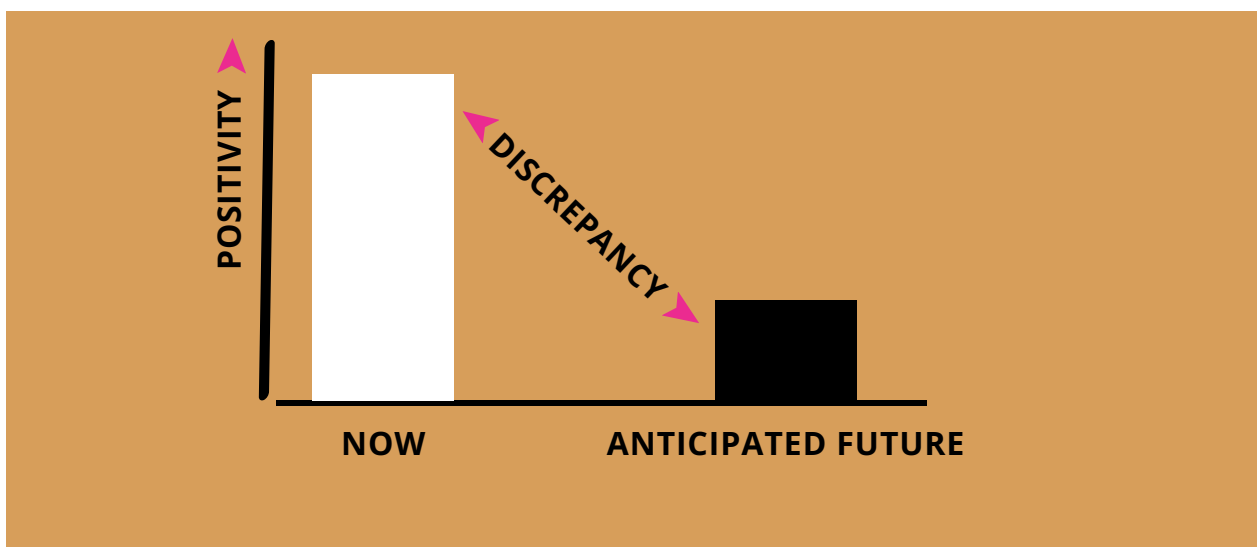
Having certain demands in a particular situation can also cause a conflict. Consider a night, such as New Year's Eve. Although we have a high expectation that it must be fun, it often is not as much fun as the more spontaneous nights. In this case, a conflict may have arisen that evening, convincing us that it isn't as fun or spectacular as you wanted it to be. You notice that the current moment is not good enough and you conclude that the actual moment does not live up to the demands you made of the moment (I expect it to be fun).



# MINDFULNESS AND PLEASANT SITUATIONS

Mindfulness teaches to focus attention on pleasant as well as unpleasant experiences and situations in the current moment. Mindfulness shows and teaches us to accept that nothing is permanent, that all events, experiences, and situations come and go. Therefore, because life is dynamic, the urge to hold on to or try to change things becomes less relevant. Without the constant change, life would stand still and it would not be possible to experience positive or negative.

*Fig.4 Created conflict between the current pleasant situation and the expected future situation*



Whenever we notice that our mind is trying to hold on to the moment to prolong the happy feeling, we can accept that this is the way our mind works and return to the present moment. Mindfulness teaches us that nothing is permanent, not even the current moment. By experiencing the changeability instead of avoiding it, we liberate our mind from the tendency to hold on to things. Since everything fades, even this pleasant moment, it is important to experience it with undivided attention. Simply by accepting that nothing is permanent, it becomes easier to return to the (pleasant) here and now. We experience the here and now with more intensity, and we are able to enjoy the moment once again.

## MINDFULNESS AND PLEASANT SITUATIONS

Mindfulness also teaches us to make fewer demands of this moment or a future moment. You approach a moment mindfully with openness, letting go of your own demands or expectations. By having fewer demands of the current moment or the future, the chance for struggle and conflict diminishes. This doesn't mean that you cannot get excited about things or hope that an evening will turn out to be fun. Rather, it refers to letting go of the idea that some future event must happen in a certain way, although there's a fair chance that the future moment will eventually not meet your expectations. Hence, a conflict or struggle is inevitable. By letting go of this "demand of the future", a conflict is less likely to emerge.

## EXERCISE: THREE-MINUTE BREATHING SPACE

The first step to changing conflicts and struggle is to become aware of the fact that we experience a conflict or struggle. In very intense situations, this is often not so difficult. We are aware that not only our thoughts are conflicted, but also our physical sensations (for example, we experience tension in our body). Oftentimes, however, conflict or resistance can take very subtle forms. Irritation, impatience, or frustration can be present, yet we are hardly aware of them. The “Three-minute Breathing Space” exercise is a short exercise that can help us become more aware of what we are feeling this very moment.

The exercise consists of 3 sections and only takes 3 minutes to complete.

- **Awareness:** Ask yourself the question: How am I doing right now? Focus your attention on your inner perception. Notice which thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations you are experiencing. Try to translate your experiences into words. For example: “I am having self-critical thoughts” or “I notice I am tense”. What are you feeling in your body? Allow yourself to feel what you are feeling in the current moment. Accept it. You can tell yourself that whatever you’re feeling is okay, whatever is there is fine just the way it is.
- **Breathing:** Next, pay full attention to your breath. Follow the breathing with your attention.
- **Expansion of attention:** Allow your attention to expand to the rest of your body. Feel your breath move throughout your whole body. With every inhale, you can feel your body expand a little and with each exhale it shrinks a little.

During this exercise, certain thoughts or feelings might distract your attention. Simply notice them, you can decide to observe these thoughts and feelings for a while and then gently, without judgment, return your attention to your breath or your body.

## INFORMATION: THREE-MINUTE BREATHING SPACE

The “breathing space coping” exercise is an exercise, which can help us 1) get in touch with what we’re feeling and 2) turn acceptance to more natural, automatic response. Instead of reinforcing the automatic tendency to avoid negative experiences and struggle with the transience of positive experiences, this exercise can teach us a new response, acceptance.

But what is acceptance? There are a lot of misunderstandings considering the role of acceptance in mindfulness. Upon hearing the word “acceptance”, most people make the following association: saying yes to everything and just “letting people walk all over you”. However, acceptance within mindfulness has a completely different meaning. It means that you accept that a) a situation occurs and 2) this situation evokes certain feelings. This does not imply you actually agree with the situation.

Let us assume that someone accuses you of something and it is completely unjustified, by no means do you have to agree with this accusation. However, you can accept this situation and the feeling that this accusation elicits in you, for example, anger. In other words, you accept the feeling of anger (what else can you do; the situation and the anger are there anyway), yet you make it clear that you feel this situation is unjust and you do not agree with it. Another example might be a train being delayed. You accept that the train has been delayed (you can’t really change anything about the fact that there is a delay) and you accept your feelings of frustration. However, you still do not agree with a delay or even the reason for the delay, so you may decide to file a complaint.

**ACCEPTANCE MEANS WE ACCEPT  
OUR FEELINGS, NOT THAT WE  
AGREE WITH A SITUATION.**

## **INFORMATION: THREE-MINUTE BREATHING SPACE**

The acceptance of the emotion creates space between the event, your appraisal of the event as negative, the emotion you feel from appraising the event (anger), and the automatic reaction (shouting). By accepting an emotion, you take responsibility for experiencing this emotion. There is nothing wrong with experiencing an emotion; it is only a reaction to the situation or to a thought. By taking a moment to observe the event, the thoughts about the event, and the emotion, and by accepting all of these things, you can avoid being influenced by emotion. From this space, you can choose how you want to deal with the situation; do you accept the situation? Will you raise your voice to make it apparent that you do not agree with it? Will you stay calm and say what's on your mind? (none of these options are right or wrong). Of course, you will notice, especially when it concerns intense emotions, that it is often impossible to constantly be in a state of acceptance. It is rather an interplay between acceptance and resistance, which is perfectly fine. Try to see for yourself if you can become aware of this interplay.

# AT HOME

- Do the exercise “Three-minute Breathing Space” three times a day.
- Try to be more conscious this week about the way in which you deal with distressing and pleasant situations. Can you notice when there is resistance? How do you deal with this resistance?
- This week, try to do the seated meditation as often as you can.
- When you do the seated meditation, pay attention to the emergence of any conflicts or struggles. Perhaps you will notice that you experience resistance before you do the exercise. Perhaps you do not feel like it or you feel a strong urge to quit during the exercise. Try to become aware of this conflict. What do you feel at that moment? What are your thoughts? Can you accept these thoughts? You can apply the same tactic to painful sensations. You might start feeling cramps during the exercise. Instead of immediately changing your position, you can try to guide your attention towards the sensation. Can you accept this? Can you notice what role your thoughts are playing in this sensation?

# LOGBOOK

## MONDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
How do you Deal with Pleasant/Unpleasant Situations?		

## TUESDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

# LOGBOOK

## WEDNESDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
How do you Deal with Pleasant/Unpleasant Situations?		

## THURSDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		



# LOGBOOK

## FRIDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
How do you Deal with Pleasant/Unpleasant Situations?		

## SATURDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

# LOGBOOK

**SUNDAY**

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
How do you Deal with Pleasant/Unpleasant Situations?		

