



Managing your anxiety

Session Eight

PLEASE REMEMBER

Changes take time, patience and hard work.

The more you put in whilst completing the course, the more you get out of it.

Do you have any questions from last week's session?



Home Practice Review

How did your home practice go? Did you achieve your goals?

What did you learn from your home practice?

At the start of this course we talked about the fight, flight and freeze response and that one of the opposite responses to this is called the calm and connect response. The calm and connect response is our natural state until we perceive a need to deal with a problem, such as a possible threat. When we are in this state we feel relaxed, safe and friendly towards others.

On the course we have focused on both external and internal triggers for perceived threat. Some of the internal triggers have included sensations in our bodies, including the symptoms of anxiety such as a raised heart rate.

In this session we are going to focus on broadening our understanding of how aspects of ourselves can be the trigger for feeling threatened and for activating the fight, flight and freeze response. We will explore how we can get stuck in cycles of feeling threatened even when we are apparently in a safe place.

How aspects of our selves become the perceived threat:

Most of us have had experiences of when revealing aspects of ourselves has led to negative reactions from others, such as ridicule, contempt, criticism, bullying or rejection.

We might have been:

- Expressing vulnerability, including emotions such as hurt or fear
- Expressing our need for being understood, nurtured or connected
- Expressing our desires
- Expressing aspects of our identity, such as our sexuality
- Expressing deeply cherished views

If the response to this from others was strongly negative, we may have felt shock, confusion, hurt and overwhelmed. We will have gone into the fight, flight or freeze response.

In our minds the threat could become not only the person or people reacting negatively towards us, but also those aspects of ourselves that have been rejected by them. We could conclude that it is dangerous to reveal parts of ourselves and that acknowledging these parts of ourselves could result in us being harmed. We may adopt negative attitudes to aspects of ourselves. We may adopt safety-seeking behaviours and patterns of avoidance that aim to

prevent us experiencing rejection again, such as not expressing certain emotions and avoiding being vulnerable around other people.

Research has shown that if people have experienced both major life-threatening events and on different occasions significant rejection of aspects of who they are, that they found the rejection more emotionally damaging and it had a greater ongoing impact on their lives compared to the life-threatening experiences.

When parts of ourselves become the perceived threat, then the fight, flight and freeze response is experienced in the following way:

Fight: *self-criticism and self-blame – aggression to the parts of ourselves that we feel threatened by.*

Flight: *hiding or denying parts of the self from ourselves and others out of fear, shame and mistrust.*

Freeze: *being trapped in a narrow and protective view of ourselves and our lives that results in a small comfort zone and a limited range activities.*



In the novel *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, there is a character called Stevens. He is the head butler in a large stately home. The guiding principle behind his behaviour is *dignity* and *emotional restraint*. If he is able to maintain control over his emotions, to not be shaken by anything that happens, then he feels safe.

Stevens learnt his guiding principles from his father, who had been a very highly regarded butler in his own right. The novel explores how maintaining dignity and emotional restraint takes its toll on Stevens' life.

Think about the example below:

Broken by a lifetime of servitude, Stevens' elderly father collapses. Stevens has to be persuaded to visit him, as he is preoccupied with carrying out his duties. His father, unusually, drops his own emotional barriers and expresses the hope that he has been a good father. Stevens responds with an awkward laugh and says, "I'm so glad that you are feeling better."

After saying that he is proud of him, his father asks Stevens more directly, "I hope I've been a good father to you, I suppose I haven't."

Stevens responds, by saying, "I'm afraid we're extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning." He leaves.

Later that evening Stevens' father has a stroke and dies, rather than be with his father whilst he is dying, Stevens returns to carrying out his duties.

- *Which parts of the fight, flight or freeze response are active in Stevens?*
- *Which aspects of himself is Stevens threatened by?*
- *What form does his avoidance and safety-seeking behaviours take?*

The Inner Bully and the Inner Helper

When aspects of who we are don't feel safe, we may develop an attitude towards ourselves that is sometimes called the *inner bully*.

The inner bully is characterised by the following attitudes towards the parts of ourselves that we don't feel safe to acknowledge or express:

- ***We become aversive towards what we are feeling in the present.***
- ***We become reproachful of who we have been in the past.***
- ***We become mistrustful of who we will be in the future.***

The role of the inner bully is to protect us from being hurt, however there is a huge price to pay as a result.

Instead of an inner bully, we can benefit from developing an *inner helper*.

The inner helper has a different set of attitudes towards those aspects of ourselves that we feel threatened by:

- ***We acknowledge and embrace all aspects of ourselves with acceptance and kindness.***
- ***We are forgiving of who we have been in the past.***
- ***We become encouraging towards our future.***

By developing and cultivating an inner helper, the fight, flight and freeze response triggered by aspects of ourselves is transformed into the following:

Self-criticism becomes self-empathy, self-encouragement and self-kindness.

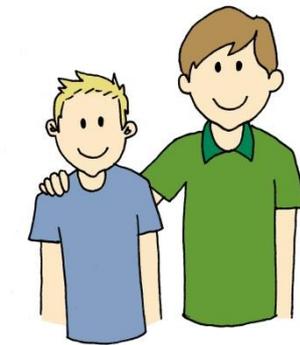
Hiding and denying aspects of ourselves becomes welcoming and embracing all aspects of who we are.

Being trapped in a limited view of ourselves and a small comfort zone becomes openness towards the world and the possibility of rewarding connection.

These are all attributes of the calm and connect response.

Returning to our example from *The Remains of the Day*, if you were Stevens' inner helper, what might you say to him in the following imagined scenario:

- *Decades later, Stevens is looking back on his life and thinking about whether the way that he responded when his father died was appropriate. One part of him thinks that he did exactly the right thing and honoured his father by putting duty first as he had been raised to do. Another part of him feels a little guilty and is reproachful towards himself for not putting his duties aside and being with his father on his deathbed. Another part of him feels anger towards his father and hurt when he thinks about his emotionally distant childhood relationship with his father. He becomes critical of himself for feeling this way.*



If we were being Stevens' inner helper, we would want to embrace and accept all of the aspects of him mentioned above, acknowledging the validity of each part. There is no need to explain or justify any of the thoughts, emotions or actions that any part of him felt. We don't need to decide which part of him is right. They are all right from their own perspective.

It can be useful to make the assumption that people are generally doing the best that they can. We are all in the same boat together making mistakes, repeating unhelpful patterns and not living up to the ideals we set for ourselves. We all struggle at times to make sense of our lives and we all experience hurt and loss. This is sometimes referred to as our *common humanity*. We might want to suggest to Stevens that he too was responding in the best way he knew how to at the time given the circumstances of his life. We often develop a broader perspective through ongoing life experience and sometimes we look back at past events and wish that we had done things differently in the past. To wish this is okay too.

You may notice that the responses from the inner helper suggested above are mainly about accepting and embracing rather than analysing or justifying. Perhaps a good inner helper is one that allows us to be exactly what we are in all of our glorious and messy contradiction and complexity, whilst gently encouraging us and being supportive of our endeavours.

When developing our own inner helper, we are not aiming to create new ideals for ourselves about becoming a better person. Doing that would run the risk of us not living up to the expectations we put on ourselves and then becoming self-critical.

Mindfulness and Acceptance with Kindness:

Take up a comfortable posture for your mindfulness practice. Check your body for any unnecessary muscle tension, and if you notice any, let it go to the extent that you can.

Turn your awareness to your breathing. At the start of the practice, deliberately slow down and deepen your breathing to the extent that this feels comfortable. Spend a couple of minutes focusing on the sensations of breathing in your body. Notice whether you can feel your body relaxing and your mind settling as you breathe slowly and deeply.

When you feel ready, switch to just noticing the sensations of breathing without trying to deliberately alter your breathing in any way.

Notice what is happening inside of you:

What thoughts are arising in your mind? If it helps, name the theme of the thought, for example “self-critical thoughts are here”.

What are you feeling emotionally? If it helps, name the emotion, for example, “anxiety is here”.

What sensations are you feeling in your body? If it helps, name the sensations, for example, “tense shoulders are here”.

Whatever you notice, say to it, “You are welcome”. For example, “Hello self-critical thoughts you are welcome”, “Hello anxiety you are welcome” and “Hello tense shoulders you are welcome”.

Notice what happens in your body and your mind when you welcome your experience rather than resist it.

This mindfulness practice helps to activate the calm and connect response. We are now going to practice adding in phrases called *kind wishes* that may help activate our calm and connect response further.

As you breathe in, imagine that you are breathing in through the centre of your chest into your heart and filling your heart with positive energy or light. As you breathe out, imagine that you are breathing this energy or light out from your heart to every cell in your body. As you breathe in, silently say to yourself, “May I...” and as you breathe out complete the phrase by silently saying “...feel safe”. Repeat this a few times.

Now tune into what you have been thinking and feeling recently, perhaps something you’ve been struggling with. If you have felt stressed, then you may want to use a phrase, such as, “May I feel calm” or “May I feel relaxed” or “May I feel at ease”.

If you have been struggling to accept yourself, you may want to use a phrase such as, “May I be at peace with myself” or “May I embrace all that I am”.

If none of these phrases feel right, see if a phrase comes to mind that is a kind and caring wish for yourself that is the antidote to what you have been struggling with. For example, if you have felt unhappy, you might use a kind wish such as “May I be happy”.

Whichever phrase you come up with, repeat this phrase as you breathe light or energy into your heart and out from your heart to every cell in your body.

After a few minutes, lift or open your eyes, move in any way that you need to so that you are comfortable and bring your relaxed, spacious awareness back to your everyday life.



Home Practice



In order to get the most from CBT it helps to practice at home.

Summary of Session Eight

In this session we looked at how we can get stuck in the fight, flight or freeze response because aspects of ourselves act as triggers.

We looked at how self-criticism can be changed to self-kindness, how we can embrace and welcome all aspects of ourselves and how we can become more open to the world and the possibility of rewarding connection.

We looked at how we can use mindfulness and acceptance with kindness to develop the calm and connect response.

Write down one key point that you have learnt today:

Suggested Home Practice for Week Eight:

- Continue with any of the practices that you have found useful on the course so far.
- Mindfulness practice, which we can do in any way that suits us as individuals, can be carried out of our practice sessions and into the whole of our lives. The aim is to become better at noticing what we are thinking, the sensations in our bodies and our emotions, along with how we cope with them.
- Practice mindfulness during any moment of your life, welcoming and embracing all aspects of yourself.
- Try sending yourself whatever kind wishes help you to feel calmer and safer.
- If you notice yourself being self-critical, try replacing your self-critical thoughts with self-encouraging ones.

Are there any SMART goals that you want to set for yourself this week? If so, write them here:

1)

2)

3)

