

Mind Skills: change the way you feel

Brendan Lloyd PhD, June 2020. b: 03

Let's say that you wish to mow your lawn. You go to your garden shed and come out with a hammer. I guess it's possible to go around the yard systematically hammering in each blade of grass. You might even achieve an outcome that looks something like your stated objective, ie., to make the lawn shorter. But really; is this the right tool for the job?

So it's not a question of whether the hammer works or not. We don't need to ask, *does this hammer work?* You can see the results for yourself. Sure, the hammer works. Interestingly, though, it's you doing the work, not the hammer. The hammer is a tool; but is it the right tool for the job?

It's this kind of thinking that drew my attention to mind skills. Mind skills make particular sense as the right tool for the job if

you already understand that our *felt experience* is the issue.

We can see our felt experiences as outcomes. In other words, the experience you have has come about due to a process. All processes are made up of steps. The activity of your mind is one step, at the very least, on your way to a felt-experience.

How you feel, at any point in time, comes from a response in your body that was triggered by your mind. There is the response then you feel it. The chemical structure in your body changes as your mind changes. For example, there is a change in perception, and then you feel different. So, how do the felt experiences of stress, anxiety or depression come about?

It's the head-chatter

Straight up, without the whys and wherefores, the head-chatter is the issue because it triggers the emergency button for no good reason. When I say "emergency button" I'm using a metaphor to represent *the sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system*; we're interested in the release of the emergency chemicals into your veins; namely, adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline and *cortisol* change your felt experience; they directly change the way you feel.

Adrenaline is largely responsible for that jittery-nervous tight chest churning gut experience. Cortisol is a likely suspect for low

energy, or feeling fatigued or exhausted for no good reason; it will also be responsible for withdrawing and hiding and the feelings of alienation and depression.

It's your head-chatter that continuously whacks away on the emergency button. Or to put it more precisely, it's the unnoticed, unattended head-chatter that gets you on the emergency button and keeps you there.

If you give your body half a chance at recovery from any demand, challenge or threat, your adrenaline and cortisol will ebb and flow as needed. Adrenaline will last for minutes, tops, in your blood stream and in the synapses of your nerves. Yet, interestingly, the experience of anxiety will linger.

When I say that "anxiety lingers", what I

mean is *adrenaline at elevated levels over an extended period of time*. We could define anxiety as the unwanted experience from persisting elevated levels of adrenaline.

It's the head-chatter that keeps the adrenaline alive for no good reason. The head-chatter keeps the adrenaline topped up, rather than allowing it to resolve back to a baseline. The cortisol is not far behind.

When we get that adrenaline feeling in our gut there is a threat. It is an unresolved threat. It's not understood as a threat. The head-chatter churns it over and over. **Consequently the head-chatter is the continuous expression of the unresolvable threat, or threats.** These are the threats that we project on to the outside world. That's why it's a good idea to be into what your mind is up to.

Mindful awareness

Mindfulness is defined as *awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally.*¹ This definition comes down to a conscious choice for when, where and how you focus your attention. It's all about your focus of attention as mindful-awareness.

In addition to paying attention on purpose we are told that we also need to do it non-judgementally. This is taking your focus of attention one step further. All the same there is no rule here that dictates, "Though shalt not judge." This is about your openness, acceptance but probably more so your curiosity and interest. We pay attention with curiosity and interest and find mindful-awareness.

Not only does Mindfulness describe its own type of awareness it also says that it needs to happen *now*. It didn't happen then; it won't happen when; it just happened a second ago; and there it goes again; shit it doesn't stop; *now* is endless.

This is an interesting aspect of Mindfulness,

this *present moment* thing. It's one of those Buddhist paradoxes. There is no present moment. That is, unless you think of *the present moment* as a process rather than an outcome.

For example, you can focus on your breath to bring your attention to the present moment. You don't stop breathing; you don't become frozen in a slice of time. You continue to breathe; you continue to focus on your breath; you are present; you will remain present whilst your attention is real-time. You don't even need to focus on your breath to achieve this; whatever is before you is worthy of your attention in real-time. Just don't forget to breathe.

The present moment, or real-time, is an unfolding event. Take for example a conversation between two people. They both remain focused on the conversation yet the content of their conversation recounts the past and predicts the future. The conversation is real-time as an unfolding event. You could say that these individuals are mindfully aware whilst their attention is on the conversation, regardless of its content.

Mindfulness is a certain type of awareness. It's done on purpose; it requires an attitude of curiosity and interest; and it's a real-time event.

As a real-time event, mindful awareness is there at your fingertips, in the mundane moments, or during any moment of your waking life; moment by moment, breath by breath. Or at the very least, mindful awareness is potentially available at any time on any breath. We can all make the conscious choice to go there or not.

So why would you spend your time on this stuff? What's in it for me? For my way of thinking, mindful-awareness needs to have a practical application.

Mind skills

Mind skills are the practical application of mindful-awareness. In other words, mind skills are the doing of mindful-awareness. Mind skills are how you focus your attention in a particular way, on purpose, in real-time.

*Noticing and focusing*ⁱⁱ

Noticing and focusing is fundamental to mindful-awareness. With this skill you bring your attention back to real-time from elsewhere.

For example, your mind drifts off into the head-chatter; you notice the shift in consciousness; you bring your attention back to real-time. You can use your breath to engage your focus of attention back to real-time; on purpose; anytime.

Much of our head-chatter is subconscious in the sense that we do not necessarily have a fully conscious awareness of its presence. In other words, we can be doing it, and not noticing that we're doing it. All the same, there it is, banging away at the emergency button whether we notice it or not.

You might notice the adrenaline before you catch on to the head-chatter. The way you feel at any given point in time might be your first clue that you're stressed, anxious or panicky. There will be head-chatter. Your attention will be elsewhere.

Use your breath to re-connect with real-time; this is the noticing. Look at the world around you. What do you see? This is real-time; this is the focusing. You can then re-engage in the world around you. You bring yourself back to real-time. Your attention changes and your body chemistry will change to match, if you let it.

The fundamental skill of mindful-awareness is noticing and focusing. The skill is your ability to *bring your attention back* to real-time.

*Sense of proportion*ⁱⁱⁱ

An obvious sense of proportion is that the threat does not exist in real-time other than in your head-chatter. With mind skills you reveal this fact to your body. If your mind no longer says threat, your body will get off the emergency button; the residual adrenaline will breakdown soon enough; the cortisol will follow.

A sense of proportion is usually thought of as a cost-benefit analysis. So, when the head-chatter takes you to breaking point, you can ask yourself, "Do I benefit in any way from producing all this adrenaline right now?"

A sense of proportion can easily be lost in amongst the half-truths of the head-chatter. It's all too easy to escalate a bad situation to a worse situation; like for example getting more and more bogged down in the head-chatter. The process of developing a useful sense of proportion could take years; so why not get a head-start and begin now?

A sense of proportion would grow from mindful-awareness. Eventually, a sense of proportion is something that you will have, to draw on, to cool down your mind in the heat of the moment. In the heat of the moment we need some way back to a resolution. It takes mindful awareness to ask, "What is it that I really need right now (other than making thing worse for myself)?"

A sense of proportion is not so much an outcome or a destination; it is useful though to engage in the process of developing a sense of proportion.

Thinking

In its essence, **thinking** is a tool. It's a tool because we go and get it when we need it. One of its primary applications is adaptation. You wouldn't survive for five minutes out there if it wasn't for your ability to think.

We use thinking to plan, to gain understanding, to make decisions, to resolve

and to let-go. In contrast, head-chatter is the opposite of thinking.

Thinking is the tool that we can use to rein-in the head-chatter; we apply our sense of proportion; we slow it down; we cool it off; we name the threat and let it go. All this requires thinking.

What we let go of is the head-chatter. Otherwise it sucks us in. Head-chatter is mainly a subconscious mental process. With thinking we make it conscious. We bring our attention back to real-time. We consider the head-chatter's content without getting bogged down in it.

The main skill here is to recognise the difference between thinking and head-chatter.

Naming the threat^{iv}

Knowing the threat could be the key to resolving it. Naming the threat is a useful skill to help you to resolve the adrenaline back to baseline.

Interestingly, the content of the head-chatter does not hold the answers. We learn about our threats from the thematic expressions of the head-chatter. The thematic expressions are there in the head-chatter if you know what to look for.

This is where the *Threat Thesaurus User's Guide* could help. There is a column in the thesaurus that contains phrases that might at least *sound like* the expression of your head-chatter. You can compare what your head-chatter actually sounds like to the samples in the thesaurus.

What's the head-chatter sound like, rather than what's it mean? For example, does it sound like the threat of imperfection or the threat of abuse or the threat of catastrophe or the threat of abandonment? Or does it sound like the threat of invalidation or the threat of shame or the threat of subjugation or the threat of failure? Or does it sound like the threat of isolation or the threat of

deprivation or the threat of unfairness?

Think of what you'd be doing by naming the threat. It would be missing the point to think of this as a ritual. Think of it as a conscious process where you require your attention in real-time.

You can start with your breath. Your attention has been elsewhere, in the head-chatter. You focus on your breath and you relax to breathe out. You have your attention in real-time. You can now view your head-chatter in a different light. What's it saying? What am I telling myself? What's it sound like?

By going to the trouble of naming the threat you are at least demonstrating to yourself that the threat does not exist in real-time other than in your head-chatter. The head-chatter is the engine room for stress, anxiety and depression.

By naming the threat you gain an understanding; this is heading toward a resolution. This understanding will help to settle your body. Continue to relax on your out-breath. You name the threat to allow the letting-go. To relax on your out-breath you let go of your breath. **For these unresolvable threats, the letting-go is the resolution.** Think of this skill as a lifetime project.

Mental discipline

This is all about the effort that it takes to live a satisfying life that is relatively free of stress, anxiety or depression. It takes no effort at all to get lured into the head-chatter. Your body exerts no effort for your head-chatter to bang away at the emergency button. There is no real effort on your part for the release of adrenaline and cortisol into your blood stream.

Here we're talking about the effort that it takes to breathe.

We're talking about the effort that it takes to notice the head-chatter.

We're talking about the effort that is required to understand our threats.

We're talking about the effort that it takes to name the threat or threats in real-time.

And finally we're talking about the effort that it takes to let-go of the head-chatter.

Remembering

That bumper-sticker that says, "Remember to Breathe" could be an example of irony. Irony can be humour. But really this is a reminder of mindful-awareness.

By remembering to take a breath from the diaphragm you will draw your attention back to real-time. By focusing on your breath in this way you can retain your connection with real-time. This is probably not a complete strategy for solving the problems of the world. It is however the first step in a process that will allow your adrenaline and cortisol to return to a baseline.

In the heat of the moment, when the rage is about to fly, or the upset is about to well up in tears, the conscious act of taking a breath from the diaphragm can make the difference between suffering or relief; like first aid. Then you would breathe again to let the out-breath be the relaxation. More importantly it will give you a gap in time to think and to settle.

In the heat of the moment reason can evaporate. We can get sucked into the head-chatter. The adrenaline is a driving force. This is particularly true where our head-chatter is hammering on a grievance or an unrequited desire or a sense of entitlement.

We need something that will pull us back from the brink. We need to remember our values and why we go to the trouble to use our mind skilfully.

Remembering is an intentional act of focusing your attention. For example, say you lose your keys. You can't remember where you put them. This is because you did not pay attention when you put them down. At that time when you placed your keys down, your mind was elsewhere.

Say you arrive at your destination but you

can't remember the trip. This is because during the trip your mind was elsewhere. If you do not give it your attention you will not remember it.

Going elsewhere in your mind is like going on autopilot. The conscious observer goes off-line for a period of time whilst the automated processes take over. Like walking; we don't need to pay much attention to walking.

Our consciousness is capable of making subtle shifts in and out of real-time. We are most likely to find ourselves in the head-chatter; rather than say make a conscious choice to go there. We will be triggered by something, anything that has a symbolic resemblance to our threats. We can easily be imaginatively captured by the half-truths of our perceptions and readings of the threat.

The skill of remembering allows you to break away from the seduction or the pull of the head-chatter's half-truths. **Remembering is when you go to your mind's skills rather than escalating the head-chatter.**

Real threats

So what is the difference between a real threat and a perceived threat? Strictly speaking there is no difference. All threats are perceived threats. Even if you're walking across the road and you see the bus coming at you; that will be a perceived threat. Well for starters, if you don't see the bus at all then you will not respond to a threat. Your death will be due to the laws of physics, which has nothing to do with perceptions.

The aim is to defuse and let-go of the head-chatter; to breathe; to relax on the out-breath. But what if the content tells a story of a grievance, then defusing the head-chatter will not resolve the grievance. Likewise, defusing the head-chatter will not resolve the unrequited desires, or the claims of entitlement.

When the issue is to get off the emergency button we are referring to what happens after

the trigger event. The triggers are symbolic representations of the threat. We read the environment and draw a conclusion. In relation to threats, our conclusions arrive instantly. The adrenaline is there in the blood stream ready to go.

In your mind you might not be ready to go, but your body will be; you may not have even noticed the trigger. Chances are though you'll notice the adrenaline regardless of what you call that feeling.

So here's the thing, what if there is an actual injustice and *abuse* is one of your threats? Think of this as an example that you will generalise. For example, what if you have *abandonment* issues and your partner is planning to leave you? Or what if you have *perfectionist* issues and someone is actually doing something incorrectly? What if you're a willing *self-sacrificer* but you find that you're being used?

We look for our threats and we find them. So if we have a particular focus on the world, then that will be the aspect of the world that we notice the most. If your threat is *injustice* then you will be the one who notices the injustices, whether they are actual or apparent.

The down side here is to be caught up in all those unresolvable injustices. The way to be caught up here is to be bogged down in the head-chatter's content. We get sucked in. There is always an element of truth in the content; but it goes on and on and on; it does not resolve.

If your threat is *abandonment*, just to generalise the example from above, then you will notice all the signs of abandonment. You will be on watch for the signs; you will be waiting for them. Your head-chatter's content will be full of theories, possibilities and questions; you may find this a bit stressful.

If your threat is *chaos* then you will be the one who notices the imperfection. You'll be the one with all the possible answers for all

the possible contingencies. You'll be the one hovering and making sure that it's all done properly. The head-chatter could easily sound judgemental and superior. These unrelenting standards could certainly make you and everyone around you, feel stressed.

Yes, but what if it's real? What if they really are out to get me? What then? Without stretching the point too far, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that they're not out to get you. The action of others, who may or may not wish to harm you, has nothing to do with your paranoia.

If you're gifted with paranoia then you'll be the one who sees it coming. You'll have this radar that spots trouble at 50 paces. You'll be the one who steps a little to the left just before the piano hits the ground one metre to your right. In the end though it can be stressful maintaining that heightened vigilance all the time.

At this point in time, where does the threat exist, other than in your head-chatter? At some point in every day we need to put aside the demands, challenges and threats to get a good night's sleep. The requirement for sleep will be a priority at some time in each day; the injustice will still be there in the morning after your good night's sleep.

When it comes to defusing the head-chatter to let it go, we are not trying to solve the issues of the world; it could be as simple as getting a good night's sleep. Mind skills are not earth shattering but you will be able to change the way you feel. Chances are too, you'll get better at it – attention back in real-time relaxing on the out-breath.

Practise to breathe

No, I'm not having you on. It's a good thing to do, to practise diaphragmatic breathing; even if you believe that you're a seasoned breather already. Your breathing can always use a tune up. You can practise whilst sitting at the traffic lights; whilst standing in a queue; or whilst watching TV during the ad breaks.

Your breath is the frontline in your relationship with your autonomic nervous system. For example, when your adrenaline is elevated you can get that sense of backing away from the emergency button with just a few focused conscious breaths with your diaphragm. You can put your practise in to practice by remembering to breathe.

When you begin your practise you can do these actions deliberately at first. For example, deliberately push your diaphragm down to breathe in. When you do that your guts will expand out. To breathe out, all you need to do is let-go. Just let the air escape from your body. To do this you relax your diaphragm. It will automatically contract back to its relaxed position. Then you re-engage your in-breathe; expand your diaphragm to push out your guts again; then let go to breathe out; repeat this a few more times until you have the hang of it. Then relax yourself into this style of breathing until it begins to feel more natural.

You can do this practise as many times as you like for as long as you like. Fit the practise in during the ad breaks, whilst sitting in traffic, or waiting in a queue, etc. You can also do the practise to help yourself off to sleep at night.

Have you noticed what you're doing with your breathing whilst on a roll in the head-chatter? Chances are you'll be very constricted around you're diaphragm. You'll be braced for an

attack. You might even be holding your breathe at times. Your intercostal muscles between your ribs will be tense and tight.

When there's adrenaline pumping through your veins, it's not the relaxation so much that will make the difference to the way you feel. Relaxation on its own is like swimming against the tide if your head-chatter is still whacking away at the emergency button.

What will really make the difference is how and where you focus your attention. The relaxation will be a by-product of focusing on diaphragmatic breathing as a real-time event.

We focus on the process; which means we focus on how you get there. You get there by bringing your attention to your breath. Your breath is in real-time already. The threats that are expressed in your head-chatter do not exist in real-time other than in your head-chatter. You name the threat and let the head-chatter go, like a box on a conveyer belt, or like passing traffic, or like anything else that comes and goes.

Your breath will bring your attention to real-time. Your mind skills will name the threat and let the head-chatter go. Your adrenaline will return to a functional baseline; the cortisol will follow. You will change the way you feel.

ⁱ Jon Kabat-Zinn: *Defining Mindfulness*;
<https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/>

ⁱⁱ Three-Minute Breathing Meditation;
<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Explained further in: *Anxiety as the Felt Experience*;
<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/AnxietyAsTheFeltExperience.pdf>

^{iv} Threat Thesaurus User's Guide;
<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/The-Threat-Thesaurus-2019-11-13.pdf>