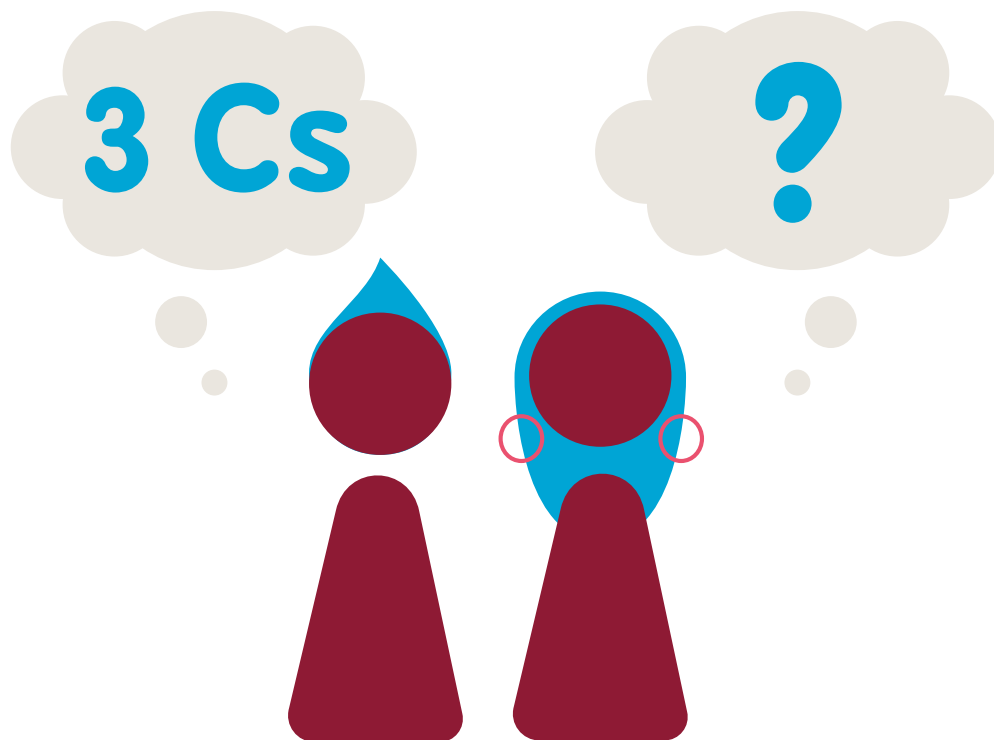


Mindful Living

Chapter 4: The 3 Cs



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The 3 Cs of Mindfulness: Curiosity, Compassion and Calm Centre



In this final chapter we will build upon what we have already learnt about mindfulness, and introduce three key concepts that all start with the letter C. We call them the '3 Cs' and they stand for the qualities of 'Curiosity', 'Compassion' and 'Calm Centre'. We'll discuss each C in turn, exploring how they encourage us to respond mindfully, both within our meditation practice and day-to-day life. As with the previous booklets, we include guidance for the accompanying meditations at the end of the chapter.

It's possible that you may find some of the ideas in this booklet new or challenging. Whilst we encourage you to approach them with an open mind, please also listen to what you need. As with any part of this self-directed course, it's okay to miss out any sections if they do not feel helpful for you at this time.

The first 'C' is Curiosity

We have already discussed the mindful attitude of curiosity in chapters one and three. It was important to address this early on in the course as curiosity is the starting point for any form of mindful meditation. For the same reason, curiosity is also the first of our 3 Cs.

Curiosity is about being interested in what is unfolding in the present moment. It is a type of interest that does not try to influence or change

what is observed. As such, when we find ourselves reacting strongly to a situation, it might be a sign that we are caught up in fighting against what we don't like, rather than being curious about it.

A stylized illustration of a person in a black dress with a red circle for a head, positioned next to a large, empty speech bubble. The entire illustration is set against a light blue background.

The quality of curiosity highlights the difference between mindfulness and relaxation practices. For example, an approach to relaxation might be to 'tune in' into gentle music in order to bring about a state of calmness. Whereas in mindfulness meditation, rather than strive for relaxation, we are simply curious about whatever is present. In this way, we try to remain interested and accepting towards all parts of our experience, even the unpleasant bits. Often this type of mindful observation does bring about a sense of calm, but this is not the primary goal of mindfulness. The goal, if there is one as such, is to simply be aware.

Regular meditation helps us to become more genuinely curious about our internal experiences, which in turn makes us more aware of our own reactions. As we get more skilled at this, we might also find ourselves applying curiosity to life events as they occur. In the accompanying video for this chapter, we meet Jack whose car has broken down. He is understandably frustrated by this set back, but has got rather lost in a series of negative thoughts and reactions about the situation.



Jack is encouraged to bring curiosity to his situation. In so doing, he pauses from reacting against his experience and instead tries to bring an open, non-judging curiosity towards it. In this way he behaves somewhat like a curious scientist, intent on observing the results of his experiment without influencing them.

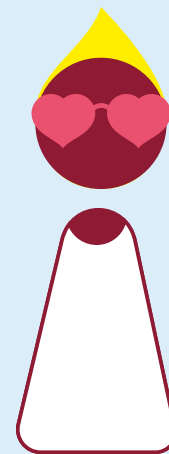
This open curiosity helps Jack to become aware of how his negative thinking (that is, his reaction to what has happened) is making him more upset and stressed than he would like to be. This realisation is important as it helps him to see he has an element of choice regarding how he responds. In other words, there may be other ways to 'deal' with the situation.

Although pausing long enough to be curious does sometimes mean acknowledging our sense of struggle: as with Jack, this insight into our own reactions can be useful information. From awareness comes choice and we'll explore with the next two Cs the chance to respond more mindfully.

The second 'C' is Compassion

Compassion is another word for kindness. It is seen as an important value in all mindfulness traditions. In this course we focus on 'self-compassion' which means showing kindness towards yourself.

Learning new skills:



It's not uncommon for people to struggle with self-kindness; perhaps finding it a confusing or difficult concept. If this is the case for you, it might be helpful to think of compassion as just another life skill. Although it may feel tricky to begin with, the more you practice, the easier it will become.

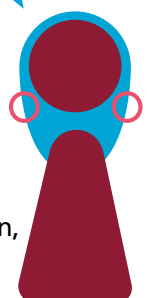
As with the other mindfulness attitudes, we learn compassion because of its potential to help us cope with the present moment. For example, if we tend to be overly self-critical towards ourselves (the opposite of compassion) we will likely find it harder to cope when faced with difficulty: as not only do we have the tough situation to deal with but also our self-criticism.

We sometimes forget that the way we speak to ourselves can affect our mood and self-confidence. To understand this better, imagine speaking to a friend about a problem. Consider how you would feel if they responded with criticism and judgement, compared to how you would feel if they showed you kindness and support?

As such, it's important to notice any self-critical thoughts that arise in your meditation practice.

This is not about getting drawn into an argument with yourself; you don't need to push thoughts away or try to change them into something else. Just note their presence, perhaps stating "critical thoughts are arising" and then let them go as best you can. Refusing to engage with critical thoughts is a form of self-compassion, which over time may help you to relate to yourself with more kindness.

"Remember not to criticise yourself for having critical thoughts!"



It can be difficult to change the habits of a lifetime. If you are finding it hard to cope with persistent self-criticism then it may be helpful to speak to a mental health clinician about how to access support for this.

Let's consider Jack and his broken-down car again. After being curious about how stressed he was feeling, and noticing there were many self-critical thoughts present, Jack began to wonder if he could respond differently towards what he was experiencing. He decided to apply a more compassionate stance to his situation.

During this process, he realised that as well as being too hard on himself, some of his stress was from anxiety; he had been imagining his boss would shout at him for being late. Letting fearful predictions of worse case scenarios get the better of us can be just as harmful as self-critical thinking. As such, by viewing both his critical and anxious thoughts as just 'mental events' (rather than facts), Jack was able to start to let go of them.

When we step back from negative thinking, we might find that a kinder response naturally emerges. For example, once Jack let go of his self-criticism, he realised it was okay to find his situation difficult and that it wasn't his fault (nor his car's fault!). As a result, he was able to respond to himself in a more supportive way.



The Middle Way of Mindfulness

Sometimes we are prone to self-criticism because we believe it will help us achieve perfection. Often this comes from a mistaken belief that we only have value if we are perfect. Sadly, this is a way of thinking that can leave us cycling between striving too hard for perfection and then becoming self-critical when we can't achieve such impossibly high standards.

Mindfulness helps us to escape this painful cycle by encouraging a sense of 'good enough' regarding our experience. We can think of this as a 'middle way' between perfection and imperfection. So instead of criticising ourselves for imperfection, we view it as just an inevitable part of our existence; something to work on accepting rather than judging. When we apply this kindly attitude toward ourselves in meditation, we may start to feel good enough - exactly as we are! Unlike chasing perfection, the middle way is both compassionate and realistically achievable.

If you feel at all prone to self-criticism and the thought of being kind to yourself seems tricky, you might find our short meditation called the 'Compassion Generator' to be helpful. This is described in the concluding meditation guidance and there is also an audio file available on our website.



Compassionate responding is likely to be different for everyone, so feel free to do what works for you. Some ideas to get you started could include:

- Repeating a kindly phrase to yourself such as: "I'm okay" or "I'm doing the best I can"
- Imagining what you would say to a good friend if they asked you for help? Can you bring a similar sense of friendliness towards yourself?
- Focusing on the region of your heart, perhaps imagining it was pumping out warmth and care into your wider self
- Following the breath whilst visualising each breath as being a wave of love and acceptance flowing over you

The third 'C' is Calm Centre

What if, even during times of stress and upheaval, we had a 'calm centre' ready to welcome us? What would this look like?

The experience of calm centre is probably different for different people. However, there is an underlying theme in that our calm centre is the place from which we can step back from the 'heat of the moment'. When we connect to our calm centre, we are less likely to react to difficulty with resistance and struggle, and more likely to find a coping response.

You may be thinking this sounds like a nice idea, but how do I find my own calm centre: it seems to be missing!?

Firstly, it's important to recognise that getting 'rattled' and 'stressed' about life events is normal and we are not suggesting that those who practice meditation never do this! However, mindfulness does give us glimpses of our calm centre: little moments in which we notice ourselves responding differently; perhaps with more space, kindness or wisdom. If we can recognise and 'grow' this tendency in our meditation practice, it may also become available to us when we need it in our wider lives.

Finding our Calm Centres

Finding our calm centre involves 'stepping back' from any negative thoughts or actions that are fuelling our distress. Often this is easier after we've already applied the previous two Cs of curiosity and compassion to our situation. Though for some people, the stages might all happen at once or in a different order.

The following suggestions are designed to help you connect to your calm centre. Some may feel more helpful than others and it's okay to just do what works for you (or to find your own way of approaching this idea).

In new perspectives

In the video, Jack finds his calm centre using the metaphor of a telescope. He imagines viewing himself as if seen from far away through the lens of a telescope. He sees a tiny human being getting very upset and stressed about his tiny broken-down car! This gives him a wider perspective on his problem; it begins to seem more like an inconvenience rather than a disaster. Jack reflects on this and recognises

that it was his negative thoughts that made him feel unable to cope with the situation. Understanding this helps him to feel more confident and able to deal with what has happened.

The telescope perspective is about taking a wider view of problems. For example, can you imagine yourself as just another one of the 7.5 billion humans on this planet, all of whom are dealing with problems in their lives?

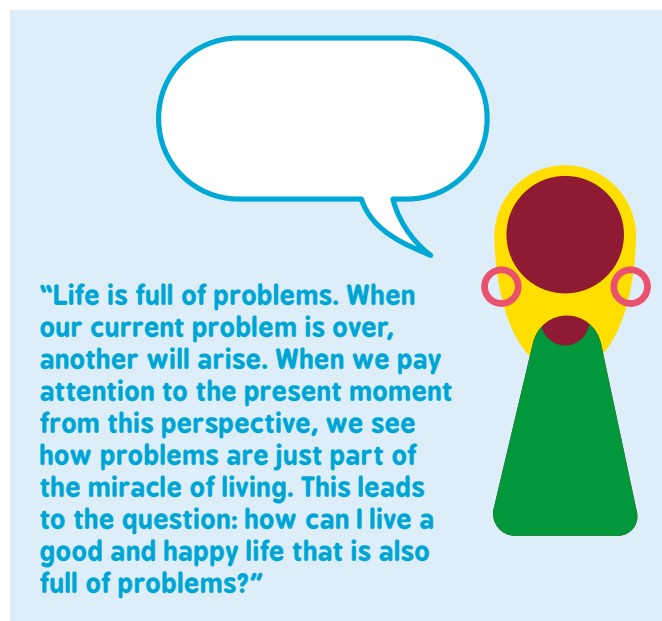
Or you could go really big with this way of thinking, remembering that the entirety of humankind is confined to the surface of a spinning ball of rock called the Earth. The Earth is orbiting the Sun which is just one of 400 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. There are over two trillion galaxies in the observable universe!



We can even meditate on these ideas: perhaps doing a version of Sky Meditation but at night time. When you see the stars on a clear night, you are only seeing a tiny part of the Milky Way galaxy, yet they seem immeasurable in number. Does connecting to the vastness of our universe bring a new perspective (and sense of proportion) to the ups and downs of life?

If these kinds of ideas seem a bit too 'out there' for you, that's okay! You might prefer to reflect on perspectives closer to your personal experience. Maybe consider the following questions:

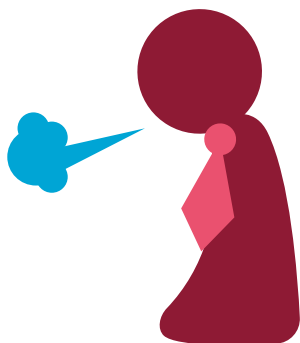
- Will this problem still seem important in a few days' time, or in a few months or years from now?
- If a friend had the same problem, what attitude would you advise them to take?
- If you could let go of all self-criticism, guilt or worry; how would this affect your view of the situation?
- What happens when you refuse to engage with negative thinking?



"Life is full of problems. When our current problem is over, another will arise. When we pay attention to the present moment from this perspective, we see how problems are just part of the miracle of living. This leads to the question: how can I live a good and happy life that is also full of problems?"

In the breath

In chapter two we explored how the breath is naturally calming and has the potential to soothe strong emotions. When we turn our full attention to the breath in any given moment (temporarily stepping away from thoughts and actions), we create a sense of spaciousness within our experience. As such, taking a few deliberate, slow and gentle breaths can be a helpful way to arrive at our calm centre.



In times of heightened stress, we might choose to add an additional element of focus to mindful breathing, such as counting the breaths. This gives the mind a task to concentrate on (other than thinking) which can be helpful if we are feeling overwhelmed by difficult thoughts. If you would like to try this, just mentally add a number to either the in-breath or out-breath. Starting at one, count each breath until you get to 10, and then start again. Or if you prefer, a variation would be to mentally repeat a phrase in time to the breath, such as "breathing in... breathing out".

In the body

Focusing awareness on a physical sensation can be grounding as it takes us out of our minds and into

the reality of the body's experience in the present moment. It could be any sensation such as a breeze against our skin, warmth of sunlight or the sense of our feet in contact with the ground.

Another suggestion is to 'check in' with what the body needs. Is your posture comfortable or do you need to move, stretch, lie down or go for a walk?



If you would like to try finding your body's calm centre through the experience of meditation, you may find the 'Soothing Space' practice helpful. This meditation helps us to stay with the sensations that arise in the body rather than the thoughts that accompany them. In this way, the body becomes a safe 'container' for feelings; helping us to hold them lightly in awareness, rather than get overwhelmed by them. Please see the meditation guidance at the end of this chapter for more details.

Allowing feelings to be 'spacious'

It is a natural reaction to withdraw inwardly when faced with difficulty. Yet sometimes it feels quite liberating to try doing the opposite: to recognise the space in and around us! You could practice this by looking around your surroundings and noticing the space between things; even in a small room there is quite a lot of unused space. Imagine allowing your feelings to inhabit this space freely. Or you could go outside and reflect on the space available there, and even up high into the sky.

Imagery and visualisations

Many people find their mindfulness practice is enhanced by taking inspiration from images, objects, poetry, music or the world around us.

We can also use these types of experience in finding our calm centre. For example, visualising a calming place to visit; it could be an imaginary setting or somewhere we have fond memories of visiting in the past. As we call it to mind, we could add details to our image, including the sights, sounds, smells and sensations of being in this place.

Or perhaps your visualisation could be a metaphor for the mixed nature of experience, such as a tree's branches swaying wildly in the wind, whilst the tree itself remains firmly rooted to the ground. Or a lake with a stormy surface whipped up by the wind, but calm and still below the surface. We provide an example of this type of guided imagery in the meditation guidance.

Using the 3 Cs in your own way

The 3 Cs encourage us to recognise the potential for choice in how we respond to our experience, both within our meditation practice and our wider lives. Although we have presented them in the order of curiosity compassion and calm centre, it's perfectly okay to do them in your own sequence. For example, sometimes we can only bring kindness to our experience after we've connected to our calm centre. There's no right or wrong way to use them and we encourage you to experiment freely with these ideas.

The 3 Cs Meditation

In the meditation guidance at the end of this chapter, we present the final mindfulness practice for this course called the 3 Cs Meditation. It is the culmination of what we have been learning and is designed to bring all the values together into one meditation. It's a little longer than previous practices and we go deeper into our internal experience, so it's a more advanced meditation.

You may also find that becoming familiar with the 3 Cs helps you to get more from the other course meditations when you return to them. For example, as you learn to apply curiosity, compassion and calm centre to your experience, perhaps you'll notice an increased ability to 'sit with' whatever arises for you.

Responding Vs Reacting

The following diagram brings together all of the themes of this course by illustrating the difference between 'responding mindfully' and 'reacting mindlessly'. No-one will do this perfectly all the time, but it can be encouraging to know that our mindfulness practice is moving us towards greater awareness and choice.



Some final top tips

Thank you for taking part in this Mindful Living course, we hope you have found it helpful and have come away with a good understanding of what mindfulness is about and how to bring it into your daily life.

To help you as you continue your meditation practice, we have provided the following 'Top Tips' (though as we've said all along, please feel free to do what works best for you).

- When you are familiar with all of the course meditations, choose one or two to focus on for a few weeks or months at a time. See what happens to your awareness and attention as you become more experienced with your chosen practices
- Consider meditating at the same time every day to help you get into a routine. Can you commit to meditating on most days?
- Try to make your meditation area comfortable and appealing, this will encourage you to practice more

- If possible and appropriate for you, consider attending a local meditation group or class in your community. You might even want to try out a mindfulness retreat experience
- Never push yourself too hard in your practice; meditation is like riding a bike, it takes some conscious effort but shouldn't feel too demanding (and it's okay to wobble a bit)
- Remember this course is a 'first step' in mindfulness. Try to stay curious about what you notice from your experience but don't expect perfection from yourself or the meditation
- It is not recommended to learn mindfulness if you are experiencing a high degree of stress in your life. If this is the case for you, we would encourage you to seek out other forms of support (it is okay to put meditation to one side until things feel more manageable)
- Try to keep using the values we have been learning about in your meditation; staying curious, compassionate and calmly responsive towards what you notice

We wish you well as you continue your mindfulness journey.

Meditation guidance

In this section we introduce the final mindfulness practices of this course: the 'Compassion Generator', the 'Soothing Space', the '3 Cs Meditation' and a guided imagery practice. As with the previous chapters, you can download the audio guidance from our website.

Our recommendation regarding your on-going practice would be to become familiar with the following meditations over the next couple of weeks. See if you can meditate most days and record what you notice in your journal. In the longer term, you could review the whole course again, picking out the practices that feel most helpful to incorporate into your daily life.

The Compassion Generator

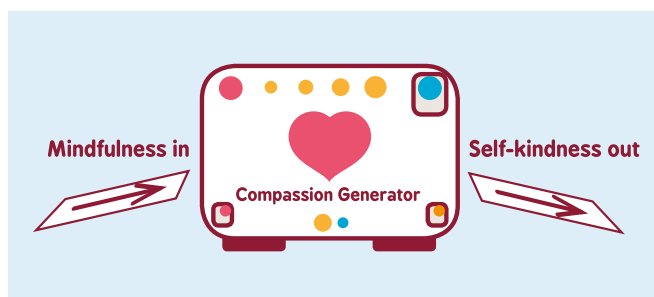
This practice is about developing a kind and friendly attitude towards yourself.

There are two stages: in the first part, we learn to approach our 'inner self' as if we were a beloved friend, supportive, attentive and always ready to see our qualities rather than our faults.

In the second stage we work on kindly accepting our limitations. We all have some element of struggle or failure in our lives. The mindfulness approach is to bring compassion and forgiveness to such things. In this way, we step back from judging and criticising, and instead befriend our 'real' selves.

It's probably best to practice this particular meditation at a time when you feel fairly settled. We will be exploring inner attitudes towards the self, which for some may be a new experience, and possibly quite challenging. The practice starts with a focus upon the heart; if you are uncomfortable with this element, you might want to skip this one.

Also remember, it's okay to pace yourself. For example, you could start with just the first stage, practicing this over a number of days, before including the second part when you feel ready to do so.



Settle into a comfortable, restful posture and invite your eyes to gently close. It may be helpful to tilt your head down slightly, to soften your jaw and to encourage your shoulders to fall away from the neck.

When you are ready, bring mindful awareness to your experience in the present moment. Perhaps start with the breath; have a sense of the in-breath and out-breath moving through the body. Notice any physical sensations arising in awareness.

As best you can, allow your experience to be exactly as it is; we do not need to struggle against what we observe.

If comfortable, invite your awareness towards the centre of your chest, where the heart resides within the torso. See if you can connect to a sense of your own heart. Notice any sensations present in this part of the body. Some people can feel their hearts beating, others not. Do you have any perception of this natural rhythm?

The heart has a practical function to pump blood around our bodies, but it also has an emotional role. We could think of it as a receptor or generator of emotion, especially that of compassion. You may want to gently rest a hand over the centre of your chest, paying attention to any sensations that arise. Perhaps imagine the heart opening and softening under your mindful attention.

Maybe we get a sense that as well as pumping blood, this organ could pump out kindness? As you connect to your 'heartfelt' experience during this practice, perhaps pause at times to notice any sensations, such as warmth or tingling arising in the region of your heart or indeed any other parts of the body.

Sometimes we find it hard to 'feel' the heart, no matter how hard we might try to connect to it. Remember this is perfectly okay, there is no need to strive to create any particular experience. If this is the case for you, simply acknowledge any lack of sensations, and as best you can, let this be as it is for now.

When you are ready, widen your focus to have a sense of your whole body, as it is in this moment. Take a few moments to consider this 'being' you are observing, maybe include your awareness, a sense of your personality and the relationships in your life.

Holding this image of yourself in mind, imagine you are looking at a reflection of yourself in a mirror.

Seeing yourself when you are at your best; well, happy and smiling. Can you mentally reciprocate this friendliness? You might find it helpful to gently smile as you meditate, as if you really are greeting yourself in this moment.

Take a moment to reflect on what being a 'good friend' to yourself means for you. How might you show yourself support and kindness?

Consider what would you like to hear from yourself right now?

To help with this, we can bring a 'well wishing' element in to the practice, in which we repeat supportive phrases. It's okay to pick your own, but some examples would include:

"May I be happy", "May I be healthy", "May I have good friendships", "May I have support in my life" etc.

Maybe take a few moments to reflect on how it feels to genuinely wish yourself well? Can you let yourself want good things for yourself?

Try to send these well wishes to yourself with a sense of kindness and friendliness; be generous in your support.

You may want to repeat the phrases in time to the breath. Or to gently touch the chest in the region of the heart again. Perhaps imagine the heart has a vast capacity to pump out care towards yourself.

Notice if the body seems receptive to this process or not. Sometimes when we are new to compassion practices, there may be some resistance to this. Perhaps we notice a sense of rigidity in the body or mind. If you notice this, as best you can, remain gentle and allow towards it, perhaps respect this experience as a sign to pace yourself.

Or it is possible you may find the meditation to be quite emotional. If so, see if you can just let any feelings flow through you, recognising the value of this release, but not needing to become closed off or analytical in your reaction towards it.

There's no right or wrong way to feel in this practice, whatever you notice is perfectly okay.

In the second stage of the meditation, we aim to bring compassion to any difficulty we notice.

Again, you might like to imagine your own image again. What words or gestures do you need when you are struggling? A hug, a kind gesture, an empathic comment or a warm smile? See if you can imagine giving these things to yourself freely.

We can be curious about how it feels to receive kindness towards our difficulty. Coming back to the breath, if we need to anchor ourselves back in the present moment, just breathe in and out of what we are experiencing.

Sometimes our compassion takes the form of self-forgiveness. It can be incredibly powerful to forgive ourselves for past regrets. As we let go of self-criticism and self-blame, we are developing self-acceptance, a form of unconditional kindness. Is there perhaps a sense of relief, from knowing we are allowed this compassion, even for our mistakes?

You may find it helpful to again repeat a phrase to yourself as you develop compassion and forgiveness in this part of the meditation. You could try phrases like; "I'm doing the best I can", "Every being makes mistakes", "It's okay to feel like this", "I can be kind towards my limitations".

Whatever phrase you use, try to bring an unconditional quality to your sentiment. This is about empathising with our struggles, rather than judging them. What does it feel like to be genuinely kind towards yourself, including any difficulties or limitations that may be around for you?

When you are ready, reconnect with the breath again for a few moments. Notice the body on the level of physical sensations, perhaps have a sense of your heart again.

Gradually widen, pay attention to all parts of your experience in this moment. Notice your whole body and your posture, the surroundings you are in and any sounds arising.

As we start to bring the practice to a close, take a moment to thank yourself for undertaking this meditation: for choosing to befriend yourself with compassion.

The Soothing Space

The soothing space can be used in times of stress, anxiety, anger, or other heightened emotions. Often we find certain feelings unmanageable because we get caught up in negative thoughts that fuel our difficulty. The soothing space meditation encourages us to let go of unhelpful thoughts and to instead focus on the ability of the body to act as a container for feelings.

To begin, bring awareness to your body and how you are sitting. Ensure your posture feels alert but also as comfortable as you can manage. Allow the eyes to gently close if you wish.

If you are sitting on a chair, notice your feet resting on the ground. Bring awareness to any sensations in both feet: the soles, heels, instep, toes etc. Pay particular attention to where your feet make contact with your shoes or the floor. Perhaps have a sense of how this contact can be 'grounding'. Allow your feet to be fully supported in this moment.

Bring awareness to other parts of the body supporting your weight: the back of the legs, the buttocks and the sitting bones. Notice where your body makes contact with the seat of your chair or other supporting surface. Can you notice any sense of pressure in the muscles and flesh taking this weight?

Have a sense of giving up your weight to gravity, allowing your body to be fully supported in this moment. The Earth is huge and we are small in comparison. We can let our full weight be held securely by the planet.

Notice the body as a whole as you sit at rest in this moment. Be curious about what you notice in your body right now. Often when we experience emotional stress or distress, our body reacts with muscular tension, tightness and discomfort. If you notice any tension or holding in the body, see if your observation is enough to bring some release. Or you could imagine breathing in gentle awareness on your inhalation and breathing out a sense of letting go as you exhale.

Allow your mindful awareness to move around the body. Bring a sense of softening and releasing with every out-breath. Invite the jaw to release, the eyes to rest back in their sockets, the hands and fingers to be soft and the shoulders to fall away from the neck.

As you bring gentle awareness into the body, perhaps notice any other sensations arising. Emotions often play out as physical feelings. Become aware of these and as best you can, name what you notice: Is there any fluttering in the belly, or a sense of your heart beating? Any tingling, tightness or other sensations? Or perhaps a sense of temperature: warmth, heat, coolness or neutrality?

Although these kinds of sensations sometimes feel unpleasant when we associate them with a strong emotion, they are not harmful in any way. They are also temporary, and often when we pay deliberate, mindful attention to them, they often seem to change or disappear.

What tends to make our emotions hard to bear is the meaning we give to them. This comes from the thoughts and images of the mind. This is especially so when we experience strong emotions.

Pay attention to any thoughts or images coming into your awareness as you breathe in and out of the experience of the body. See if you can relate to whatever thinking arises as a string of 'mental events' of the mind, rather than facts to believe and engage with.

You might want to note the nature of any thinking coming into awareness, such as "Worry is here" or "Noticing anger" or "I'm experiencing an anxious image" but then as best you can, let this go and gently return your attention to the sensations of the body or the breath.

Many of the thoughts that come into our mind when we have strong feelings are fixated on past regrets or future predictions. This type of rumination tends to fuel any sensations of fear, anger or despair we are experiencing.

If you are noticing this tendency, it is important to keep inviting your awareness back to the present moment. This will help you to stay grounded to the here and now, which is the only part of our experience we have any influence over. Often, in the present moment we find our worse fears are unfounded or irrelevant; it is only in the imagination of our minds that they grow so unmanageable.

Does letting go of thoughts (of past or future) change your experience of what you are feeling in this moment?

Simply observe your experience exactly as it is right now, with an open curiosity and not resisting what you find. Remember that you only ever need to cope in this moment.

When you are ready, return your awareness to the body, its physical sensations, its volume and solidity. Do you perhaps sense the flesh and bones that you are made of? As we get familiar with the physicality of the body through mindful awareness, we might begin to find it is a 'big enough' container for our emotional experiences.

Perhaps reflect on the impermanent nature of feelings and how they are temporary and always pass in time. Can you let any feelings and thoughts simply flow through you? Often these thoughts are not something to hold on to or over-identify with.

As we come towards the end of the practice, take a moment to thank yourself for attending to your feelings in this way. Perhaps recognise that your ability to cope is greater than you had realised, and how the body and the breath is always available to you.

The 3 Cs Meditation

This meditation is the culmination of what we have been learning on the Mindful Living course! There are three stages and as we move through them we will be exploring the themes of curiosity, compassion and calm centre. Becoming familiar with these ideas

helps us to respond mindfully to whatever arises, both in our meditation and wider lives.

The audio version of this meditation is one of our longer practices, so make sure you are resting in a comfortable position; either sitting in a supportive chair or lying on a bed or mat. You might need a blanket to keep warm.

Stage 1: Curiosity

When you are in a comfortable posture and ready to begin, allow your eyes to gently close.

In this beginning stage of the practice, we will be bringing curiosity to our experience.

We can start by inviting our awareness into the present moment. Deliberately let go of thoughts or memories about what has happened in our day up until now; and take a step back from any plans or concerns arising about the future. Instead; bring curiosity towards whatever is unfolding in this moment, right now.

The type of curiosity we are developing is one in which we gently approach our experience, but do not need to change it. We aim to be open and accepting towards what we notice. There is no need to analyse, explain or make up stories about what we find. Instead we can step away from the thinking mind, allowing our curiosity to be on the level of felt experience. So, notice physical sensations in the body, the breath and what our senses are showing us in every moment.

You might like to start with a fairly neutral experience, such as what you can hear in this moment. Notice any sounds arising within the body, inside the room or from outside.

See if you can just allow your ears to 'drink in' what they will. Be curious about what you can hear such as the tone, tempo, pitch or volume of any sounds coming into your awareness. Notice also, any moments of silence between the sounds.

Does your mind wander? Perhaps it is keen to find patterns, or work out where sounds are coming from?

It is also easy to get drawn into analysing what we hear, or judging noises as pleasant or not.

If you notice this tendency, remember this is just what minds do, and then as best you can, try to let such thoughts go. Return your full attention to just listening to sounds on the level of hearing.

Stay curious about sounds as they rise and recede in each new moment.

When you are ready, let go of sounds and bring curiosity to any sensations present in the body.

See if we can bring a similar sense towards this as we did with sounds - stay curious and open to what each moment brings. Try to allow any sensations to be exactly as you find them, noticing what is arising but not needing to change anything. Some sensations may come from physical processes in the body, and others from emotions. See if you can approach them all with the same sense of openness. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to be feeling in this moment.

We can also bring this open observation towards the mind. What state of mind are you in? Are there any thoughts or images present? Can you name any emotional experience? Calmness, rested, stressed, dull, excited, tired or something else?

Again, not judging or analysing what we find. It doesn't matter if our mental state or emotions are not as we would want them to be. In this stage of the practice we are just being curious regarding what is already present.

If you should notice any distress in this part of the meditation, you may find it helpful to imagine breathing in and out of what you are noticing, as we would in breath-based meditation. Ground yourself in the breath until you feel more settled. You might then choose to expand your curiosity to see if you notice any reactions towards your difficulty. Be curious about any thoughts or images that arise and whether you are able to let them be, or if they draw you into engaging with them.

This type of awareness gives us insight into our habitual reactions when faced with difficulty. We become more aware of how our thoughts impact on our mood and sense of coping. We also notice what happens when we step back from focusing on thoughts and instead bring mindful curiosity and acceptance towards our whole experience.

Can you be curious about your experience in this moment, perhaps pay particular attention to how you respond to this? Remember not to judge yourself for any such insights; our observation is one of kindly curiosity.

As we come to the end of this stage, hold a sense of your whole being in awareness: including thoughts, feelings, sensations and the breath. Arising and falling, changing, moment by moment.

When you are ready, move on to the next stage.

Stage 2: Compassion

Compassion is a mindful way of responding to ourselves that is especially helpful when we face difficulty.

In this stage we will explore various forms of compassion. Some elements may feel more suitable to you than others, so feeling free to tune in and out of the guidance as you wish.

To begin, we will explore the potential of the mind to offer us compassion. A compassionate mind is one willing to let go of criticism and judgement; instead offering kindly support when we need it. It will be helpful to consider this in relation to how we respond to difficult experiences. Perhaps you noticed some difficulty in the previous stage, when we were being curious? If so you may want to use this as the focus for your compassion practice.

Or if there is no difficulty in this moment, you might want to bring to mind something that you find somewhat challenging, or to use this stage to develop a wider sense of compassion towards yourself.

To begin, notice if any unhelpful thoughts are present such as self-criticism, judging, fearful predictions or unwarranted anger. Consider if this is your normal 'internal voice': your usual way of speaking to yourself? Perhaps notice if you have a tendency towards these types of negative thoughts.

Our first step is to step back from such thinking, viewing any such thoughts as 'mental events' rather than facts. It's easy to believe thoughts that come with a stab of emotion, but often this simply means their content is such that it generates strong feelings, not that they are likely to be more true than other thoughts.

Spend a few moments paying attention to thoughts as they arise, practice letting them go using the breath as a place to rest some of your attention if that feels helpful.

As we let go of negative thinking we can start to relate to our situation with more empathy. See if you can bring a deliberate sense of compassion to your experience in this moment. Perhaps imagine how a good friend would offer their support, and offer the same directly to yourself. What is it like to be friendly towards your experience?

To help connect to yourself with compassion, imagine looking at your own reflection in a mirror, seeing yourself smiling back at you. Perhaps remember yourself at time when you felt well and happy. Gently hold this smiling image of yourself in mind for a few moments.

If difficulty continues, it can also be helpful to practice coping statements. This might be as simple as reminding yourself, "I'm doing my best", or "I'm good enough" or "It will be okay". It doesn't matter what you say, so long as you find it supportive and kind.

So, take a few moments now to experiment with a coping statement of your own. See if you can drop the phrase into your meditation, perhaps gently repeating it in time with the breath. When you have practiced this for a few minutes, gently let the phrase recede from your awareness.

We can also practice compassion from stepping away from the mind and its thoughts. Instead we might choose to just stay present with the process of breathing or the sensations in the body, moment by moment.

Or you could explore the experience in the region of your heart, perhaps imagining the heart pumping out kindness towards yourself and the people you care about. Notice if any sensations arise in this part of the body, perhaps a sense of warmth or openness?

As we practice self-compassion, we tend to relate more compassionately towards others. Yet it is important in this practice to start with yourself; without kindness towards the self, our efforts towards others can become self-neglectful.

Spend a few moments practicing this self-care; responding with compassion to any part of your experience that arises in the moment.

When you are ready, move on to the next stage of the practice.

Stage 3: Calm Centre

This stage is not about forcing calmness on to ourselves or denying our other feelings. Rather it is the idea that even in the midst of flurry and stress, there is a part of ourselves that can relate calmly to what is unfolding.

Once we have been curious and compassionate towards what is arising in the moment, we might find that there is indeed a calmer experience to be had. However, the route to our calm centre can take many paths.

Some people find that just remembering they have one is enough to connect to it!

Others find it in the breath, which by its nature tends to help us regulate feelings and calm our responses. You might want to practice this for a few moments by following your own breath. Just breathing in and out, moment by moment.

You can go deeper with this by noticing how the movement of the breath also has tiny moments of stillness (as the body pauses between the breaths). See if you can pay attention to those little moments of stillness in the body.

The subtleness and contrast of stillness and movement in the body is a good metaphor for the calm centre; in that although we might be experiencing a lot of emotions and thoughts swirling around in the heat of the moment, we also have a calm centre from which mindfulness can blossom.

Another way to view this is through visualisations or imagery: such as picturing elements of the environment that can reflect the mixed nature of our experience. Such as a mighty tree with its branches swaying in the wind. Leaves pushed around all over the place, its trunk solid

and still and its roots securely held by the ground. Or a vast lake, the surface water roughed up by the wind but underneath the waters are deep and calm.

Sometimes we feel calmer when we bring a new perspective to our situation. For example, you could imagine you were viewing yourself and any problems from a great distance. How important would they seem viewed from another country or even another planet or solar system? You could also imagine viewing your problem from the ancient past or far into the future. Perhaps there might even be some humour in the situation when viewed in a different way?

Finding our calm centre isn't about dismissing problems or feelings. It is more a process in which we acknowledge that there is at least a chance for calmness to arise, even within moments that initially seem the opposite of calm. By connecting to this calmer part of our experience, we have the chance to respond with mindfulness.

We do not need to do this perfectly! To begin, maybe we can only find a tiny sliver of calm, perhaps just a moment between the breaths. Yet in time we can grow this into something steady and reliable so that we know our calm centre is always just a breath away.

As we start to bring the practice to a close, bring to mind all of the 3 Cs again: curiosity, compassion and calm centre.

Perhaps be curious about what your experience is like now you have practiced these values.

Remember to thank yourself for this act of self-kindness and see if you can bring these values into the rest of your day.

Guided Imagery: Tree

The following guidance calls to mind the image of a mighty tree rocked by the wind.

Do any of the mindfulness values come to mind when you read this? Or perhaps it will inspire you to come up with your own image or poem.

Imagine a beautiful, tall and sturdy tree on top of a hill. The tree is old and has witnessed many years and seasons on that exposed hill. It has weathered many storms; lashed by wind, rain, hail and snow. It has survived long, hot summers and cool winters.

See if you can imagine the crown of its branches, the green of its leaves and the textured bark of its trunk.

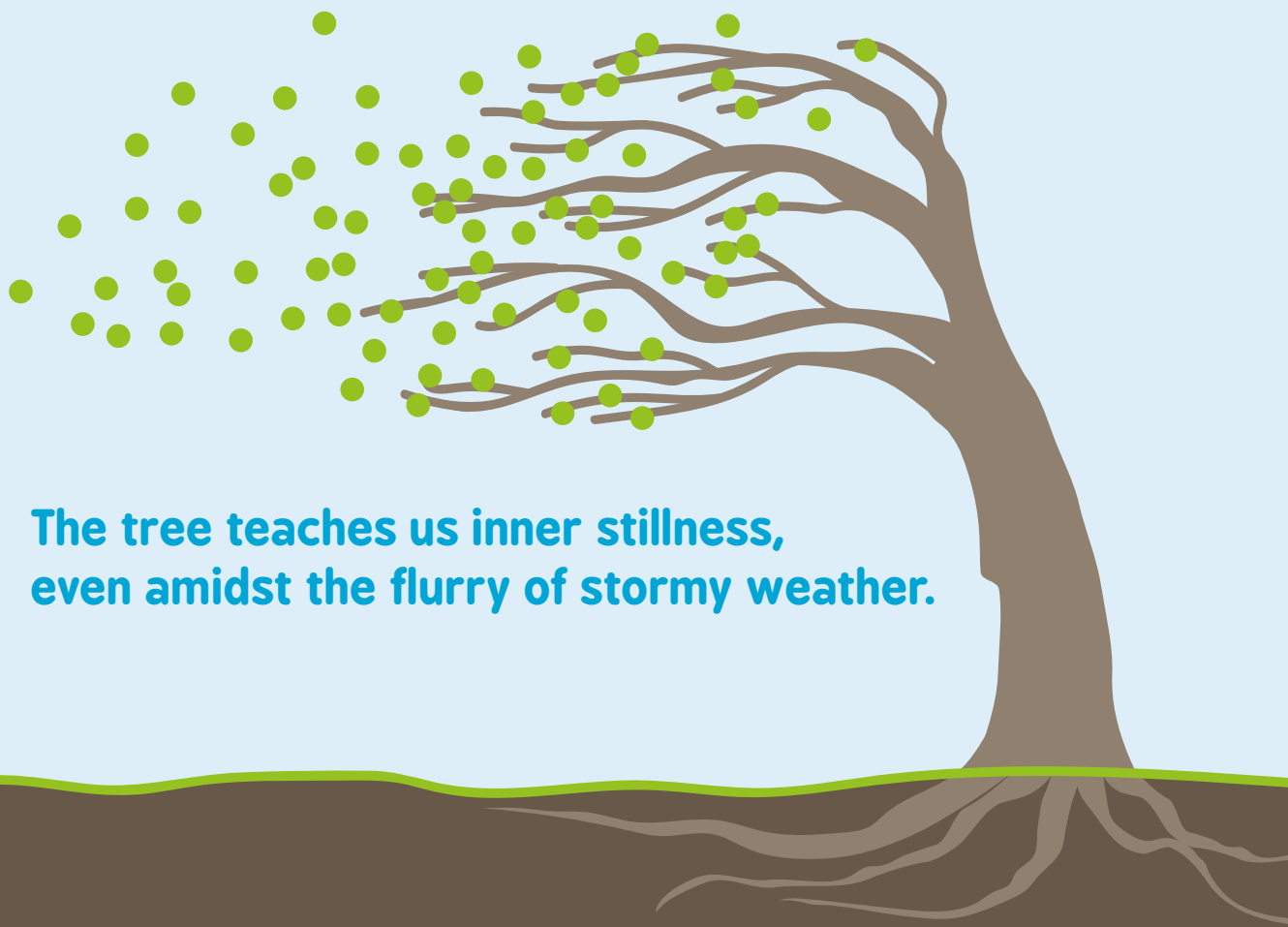
Do you also have a sense of its roots, spreading out into the soil beneath, perhaps fanning out wider than the branches above?

As you consider the tree in your mind, add in details; the plants surrounding it, the animals and insects that live within its wooden limbs and fresh foliage.

Sometimes, when the weather is calm, the tree is very still; like a silent sentinel for the surrounding lands.

Yet when a storm comes, the tree dances with movement. Branches swaying fiercely in unison as the wind lashes through them. Leaves and twigs pulled free and lost to the raging air. The tree's limbs do not resist the wind; they are flexible to survive the wild conditions.

And all the while, the sturdy trunk seems unmoving. It is steadied and grounded by its deep roots. So much so that far beneath the ground, the heart of the tree is unaffected by the storm.





**The tree teaches us inner stillness,
even amidst the flurry of stormy weather.**


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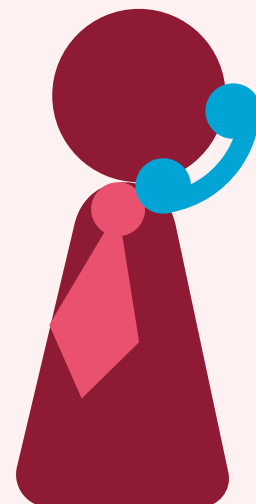
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Wellbeing Norfolk and Waveney and Wellbeing Suffolk are partnerships of NHS and voluntary organisations working together to offer a wide range of support for low mood, anxiety and depression.

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We work together to deliver a range of support interventions for people of all ages with low mood, anxiety and depression. For more information about who we are see: www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/about

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