

Being aware of your thoughts to stay steady

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As we emerge from lockdown and adapt to our 'new normal' for most of us, it is going to be a mixed bag of emotions. This blog explores finding steadiness during the transition by being aware of thoughts, finding a pause button and gaining steadiness amidst change.

Thoughts can be tricky

Thoughts are important and worth paying attention to. They are our running commentary and perception of the world. Each of us has a constant stream of thoughts coming and going. At times of transition their flow may get faster and louder.

Increased 'thought traffic' is our natural response in changeable times. Not knowing how things are going to turn out is unsettling. Our minds tend to project into the future to fill the space of uncertainty with "What-if" thoughts. Before we know it, one of these "What-ifs" spirals into a story of how things are going to get swept along with our own narrative. We are pre-programmed to keep ourselves safe from threat in this way.



These mental simulations activate our fear response and we believe them to be real. We start to see these thoughts as truth. Our brains actively look for evidence in our environment to support these beliefs. This becomes our filter of how we see the world and these thoughts become our reality. Before long, the thought that began it all, which may or may not be true has begun to pull us all over the place mentally.

However, we are not our thoughts. They flow through us; they arise linger and dissolve again. It's our weaving of stories around the thought that sucks us into believing them. Seeing thoughts as mental events that are not real, acknowledging that they are not facts helps us to reduce our reactivity.

Engaging a pause button

Our body lets us know when we get wrapped up in unhelpful thinking. Experience of this varies from person to person, it might be a racing heart, shorter breaths, butterflies in the tummy or sweating. We may be able to articulate that we feel a certain way, scared, anxious or sad for example. Noticing any of these gives you the opportunity to slow things down and ask; "What am I telling myself?" Our tendency is to push difficult or uncomfortable thoughts away, but this may only be helpful in the moment. They will most likely re-surface. Engaging curiosity to explore thinking can help us to gain clarity.

What is the evidence?

Here are a few questions that we could pause and ask ourselves; Do I know that this thought is one hundred percent true? Is there any evidence that this might not be the case? Is this projected scenario certainly going to happen? What's the evidence for and against this happening and is this really a balanced view? Could this all play out in a different way, is it possible to imagine this scenario turning out better?

What sort of thinking?

We might become curious about what kind of thinking is happening. It might be worrying, imagining, catastrophising and the like. Is it a pattern of thinking that doesn't serve you well or an unhelpful repetitive thought? We tend to generalise and become black and white in our thinking at a time like this.

It may help to notice the "What if's" and turn your attention to "What is"? For example, if the "What if" is "What if the cases increase and we get ill?" the "What is" may be "We are safe right now and we are doing all we can to stay well."

Finding a different place to stand

You might like to imagine yourself lying in a field and watching your thoughts as clouds appear in the sky. Perhaps you can visualise them moving across the sky and dissolving. The next thought may do the same. Not reacting, simply noticing, being curious. Another practice is to see your thoughts as leaves, you may write your thoughts on leaves and then watch them float off down a river, or stones on a beach and throwing them out to sea. You might find it helpful to set a timer for a minute or two to do this and practice it every day to get used to this skill.

Thinking Time

One strategy that some people find helpful is to allow themselves a designated '*thinking time*.' You might like to find a time in the day, in a certain place that becomes your unhelpful thinking moment – do put a time limit on this. Each time you find yourself noticing unhelpful thoughts, resist the urge to get caught up in the story. Tell yourself to save it for later, at your chosen time and place. When it's time you may find it helpful to write your thoughts down in a journal, recall them in your mind or say them out loud.

Breathing into clarity

When we get swept away with unhelpful thinking, we shut down the part of the nervous system that enables us to be steady and calm. One simple yet effective way we can find a pause button is to *take a breath*, notice where you feel your breath and allow your attention to settle there. Having a gentle mantra that you repeat to yourself may be soothing, something like "Let's take this one day at a time" or "Steady and calm with each breath."

There is so much that we can't control or predict. Bringing yourself back to the now can help you to resist getting sucked into those thoughts that are causing worries and anxieties. Take a moment to reset and find a pause when unhelpful thoughts come along by listing the things that you can control in this moment. A simple grounding technique is *54321*. Take a breath, look around and notice 5 things that you can see, 4 things that you can touch, 3 things that you can hear, 2 things that you can smell or smells you like and two things that you can taste. Take another deep breath.

To expand on the power of the senses you might like to try this an eight-minute Safe Space Visualisation. You can come back to this recording or parts of it in your mind's-eye whenever you need to find a sense of calm.

An attitude of gratitude

Connecting with gratefulness is another pause button that may be available to you. Make a list in the moment. Finding a way to record these each time create a physical list that is available for you to revisit.

Calm ripples

The more we practice recognising our unhelpful thinking, pausing, and drawing on our steadying strategies the better we get at it. Notice when you manage to do this, even just a little bit and congratulate yourself. Trust in your capacity to approach this 'new normal' with

acceptance and steadiness and know that this has a ripple effect. It not only calms us, but those around us too.

You may also like to read [Being Purposefully Present in Uncertain Times](#) which compliments this resource.