

Responding
(not reacting)

Between stimulus and response, there is a space.

In that space is the present moment

In that moment we can choose our response

With our response we shape our lives and the world.

We've seen how paying attention on purpose can slow everything down, we start to recognize how the different links in the chain of reactivity. The moment we feel a bit overwhelmed and have an impulse to scroll through social media, head to the kitchen for a snack or take a nap - to take our mind off it. Instead of getting stuck on difficulties (Velcro mind) and skating over the good moments in our lives (Teflon mind), we are able to recognize and stay with a broad range of experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. We can stay with the gnarly feeling, without acting on the impulse to react out of habit. We can recognize and savor pleasant moments. Turning towards and allowing experiences to be as they are, with a curious, kindly attention supports this different kind of response. It is not rocket science - over time, the more we learn we can step back and respond differently, the better we get at it and the more our confidence grows. We start to see that what the mind attends to on autopilot, what we can choose to attend to, and what we can't, which habits we starve or feed. This is not trivial. Quite the opposite, they are profound because they will shape our minds. They will shape our lives. Mindfulness training creates a space in which we can choose to respond more skillfully so that we shape our minds and lives in the ways we want to.

Box. Exercise. What Makes Me More Likely to React vs Resources Me to Respond?

Think back over the last few weeks, to days or moments where you felt gripped by reactivity or habit. What makes you more likely to be reactive? Use Column A to note some of these. What supports you to be more responsive. Use Column B to note some of these. We've started with what we know from research and experience. These lists are really a life-long enquiry, so don't worry about getting this right, it's just a start.

Column A. What makes me reactive?

e.g., Sleep deprivation, being hungry, impulsiveness.

Column B. What supports me to be more responsive?

e.g., Being well rested. Taking a breathing space.

Key points

Taking a Breathing Space creates space, a pause.

Recognizing, allowing, and decentering from our experience is a key step in responding, rather than reacting.

The context for any moment powerfully shapes our capacity to respond.

Knowing what supports us to be more responsive enables us to take care of ourselves better so we can be more responsive.

How can we use all of this to begin to respond (rather than react)? We can put together everything we've done so far and add one more step – an action step. In any moment or situation, having paused, we can ask, “What in this moment will support both my well-being and the well-being of those around me?” This pause + action step can apply to small moments, for example how we relate when our phone buzzes a notification from our favorite app; more substantial moments, for example when we feel hurt because someone we care about says something thoughtless to us; or the larger issues facing the world, the choices we make that we know affect climate change, for example. In each moment, pausing, gathering our attention and becoming aware are the precursor to choosing an appropriate response (Box below)

Box. Mindfulness Exercise: The Breathing Space with an Action Step

Step 1. Becoming Aware

Become more aware of how things are in this moment by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture, whether sitting or standing and, if possible, closing your eyes. Then bringing your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledging it, asking yourself:

- What **body sensations** are here right now?
- What **moods and feelings** are here?
- What **thoughts** are going through the mind?

Step 2. Gathering

Then redirecting your attention to focus on physical sensations associated with breathing.

Bringing the mind to settle on the breath, wherever you feel it most vividly. Tuning into these sensations for the full duration of the in-breath and the full duration of the out-breath.

Step 3. Expanding

Then expanding the field of awareness around the breath, so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression.

Step 4. Responding skillfully

With a sense of curiosity and care asking, in this moment or situation:

“What would be a helpful response?”

“What would support my well-being?”

“What would support the well-being of others?”

Note. Adapted from Teasdale, Williams and Segal (2014, p. 183).

After her teenage daughter’s parents’ evening Ling got into the car and said, “We need to do a supermarket, the fridge is pretty empty.” Ling’s daughter rolled her eyes and said, “Do we have to, I have so much homework to do – can’t you drop me home and then go and do it?” Ling felt a red mist come over her and an impulse to lash out. These thoughts ran through her mind, “I’ve had a long day too, the fridge is largely empty because you kids just help yourselves to what you want, when you want it, and now you want me to do all the shopping while you sit at home! I am a single parent; don’t you know how hard that is?” Ling took a deep breath and tuned into the sensations of her hands on the steering wheel, they’d contracted really tight, her knuckles were a bit white. She very deliberately loosened her grip and at the same time felt the grip of her anger loosen a bit too. Choosing not to say anything, Ling checked her posture in the driving seat, and adjusted herself so she was steadier and

more upright. Under her breath she asked herself the question, “What would be a helpful response? These steps enabled Ling, without reactivity, to respond by talking to her daughter and figuring out something that worked for both of them – yes, she’d go to the supermarket, and she’d go to her favorite supermarket, which was a bit more expensive but would be quiet at this time of the evening but her daughter would empty the dishwasher at home and when Ling got from the supermarket would help her unpack the shopping. Ling noticed that during her conversation the red mist cleared. Later, when she got home from the supermarket not only had her daughter emptied the dishwasher, she had made Ling a cup of tea and asked her about her day.

Box. Patience.

Do you have the patience to wait

Till your mud settles and the water is clear?

Can you remain unmoving

Till the right action arises by itself?

Tao Te Ching

Key points from all three sessions

Mindfulness is a natural capacity we all have to bring attention to our present-moment experience, in a particular way, with interest, friendliness and care.

Mindfulness practice is a training that develops this capacity.

Developing our mindfulness skills can enhance our mental health and well-being.

There are three foundational mindfulness skills that we can learn:

1. Focus. Paying attention, on purpose, to our present-moment experience.

2. Perspective. Different modes of being and knowing, and the ability to choose which mode is best suited to which situations.

3. Responding rather than reacting.

Many philosophical, contemplative and religious traditions have a version of this saying:

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

When these three foundational skills come together, this becomes more possible because we’ve created a space between stimulus and response. We use that space to choose what best serves our well-being and the well-being of others. The story of the two wolves below captures this sense of the power of how we choose to respond to our thoughts, moods, impulses as well as the world around us.

Box. The Story of the Two Wolves

There is an ancient tale of a child being taught by a grandparent about cruelty in the world and how it comes about. “A fight is going on inside me” the grandparent says to the child. “It’s a fight between two wolves. One wolf is mean-spirited and angry, and the other wolf is understanding and kind.” The child asks the grandparent which wolf will win the fight. The grandparent answers “The one that I choose to feed... will be the one that will win the fight.”