

the bus driver is warm-blooded **integrating mindfulness & emotion**

(This handout, with links, was posted at www.stressedtozest.com on 20.11.10).

In a companion post – *"The bus driver metaphor"* – I've talked about how valuable mindfulness can be when coping with worry, rumination and other unhelpful mental content. The growing research supporting "third wave" therapies like Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) demonstrates that these ideas can be extremely helpful. I personally have meditated regularly for over 40 years, so clearly I'm a dedicated supporter of this type of approach. However, partly because of my own experience, I would like to sound four notes of caution as – like anything else – mindfulness can sometimes be misused.

1.) emotions – distinguish paying passengers from freeloaders: In the original bus driver metaphor, we're encouraged to see ourselves as a bus driver navigating by our values and goals while largely ignoring the racket being made by the bus passengers who represent our thoughts & feelings. Of course this is an oversimplification. To extend the metaphor, we can loosely see the bus passengers as being of two types – paying customers and freeloaders. The paying customers want us to drive the bus route of our values. They represent primary emotions & thoughts that orientate and energise us to reach healthy goals. Listening to these 'paying customers' is typically helpful. It's the freeloaders on the back seats that we largely want to ignore. These pessimists include the distracting voices of worry, catastrophising and rumination (brooding). They are conflicted about the bus driver's advertised route that leads to welcomed goals like loving relationships, healthy self-care, development of our strengths, and exploration of our interests & enthusiasms. The back seat freeloaders try to distract the driver with discouragement, doubt & anxiety. It can be very useful to get better at responding to these freeloader voices with mindfulness, simply letting them 'wither on' like background radio. We don't have to give these unhelpful inner voices our attention or take them seriously. As the freeloaders realise that they're being 'mindfully' allowed to chatter without their opinions being given any weight, they gradually quieten down. There are linked handouts that enlarge on distinguishing helpful 'paying passengers' from distracting 'freeloaders' – see, for example, the *"Emotions, arriving & leaving"*, *"Emotions are like a radar system"* and the *"Our life stories: needs, beliefs, behaviours"* diagrams. The paying passengers of healthy primary emotions and constructive thoughts can however be very helpful to the bus driver. This may be one reason why MBCT is not recommended for early experiences of depression where, in contrast to repeated episodes, triggering outer events are more likely to need problem solving. Handouts such as *"Skilful goal setting"*, *"Problem solving"*, and *"Getting a better perspective"* illustrate alternatives to simply letting bus passenger internal thoughts & feelings just go by.

2.) close relationships are 'emotional': Occasionally people misinterpret the bus driver metaphor & mindfulness more generally to mean that they should somehow ignore their feelings and operate in a cold-blooded, almost robotic way. Sometimes this is done because of misunderstanding of what mindfulness is about. Sometimes it is done because this misunderstanding seems to justify anxious or traumatised avoidance of authenticity and close relationships. The current key evidence-based use for mindfulness is to tackle depressive-style rumination/brooding. Recent research – *"Psychosocial correlates of depressive rumination"* – suggests that rumination/brooding is strongly linked to rejection sensitivity and a submissive interpersonal style. It would be a great pity if misunderstanding of mindfulness reinforced rather than helped with these self-defeating interpersonal patterns. Handouts like *"Relationships & mortality"*, *"Psychological needs & wellbeing"* and the post on *"Friendship - a three day residential workshop"* all illustrate how crucial close relationships are for both health and wellbeing. In fact mindfulness can be a 'friend' of close relationships, helping us become more genuine, empathic and loving. See the model *"Meeting deeply"* for more on this, and too the overall sequence of posts on *"Meeting at relational depth"*. The bus driver is 'warm-blooded'. Saki Santorelli, friend & colleague of Jon Kabat-Zinn and director of the University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness, in his book *"Heal thyself"* quotes Hazrat Inayat Khan - *"The mind is the surface of the heart, the heart the depth of the mind"*. Santorelli goes on to write (p.51) *"Sometimes people confuse 'mind' in the word 'mindfulness' as having to do with thinking about or confining attention to cognition, imagining that we are being asked to engage in some [cont.]*

form of introspection ... or mental gymnastics. Simply put, mindfulness is bringing a fullness of attention to whatever is occurring, & attention is not the same as thinking ... the language of many contemplative traditions suggests that the words for 'mind' and 'heart' are not different. Likewise, the artist and calligrapher Kazuaki Tanahashi describes the Japanese character for mindfulness as composed of two inter-active figures. One represents mind, the other, heart. From this perspective Tanahashi translates mindfulness as 'bringing the heart-mind to this moment'". Fascinatingly recent research on Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy comes up with similar conclusions.

3.) gut feelings are important too: At the start of the 70's I trained for a while with a Zen meditation teacher. I can still hear his stern admonition *"Belly centre of universe. Sit like mountain!"* And in important ways, our belly, our gut feelings are at the centre of our personal universe. In his most recent book – *"Self comes to mind: constructing the conscious brain"* – published in November 2010, the brilliant neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes (p.20-21) *"Of the ideas advanced in this book, none is more central than the notion that the body is the foundation of the conscious mind ... mental images of the body produced in body-mapping structures, constitute the 'protoself', which foreshadows the self to be ... I hypothesize that the first and most elementary product of the protoself is 'primordial feelings', which occur spontaneously and continuously whenever one is awake. They provide a direct experience of one's own living body, wordless, unadorned, and connected to nothing but sheer existence. These 'promordial feelings' reflect the current state of the body ... all feelings of emotion are complex musical variations on primordial feelings."* There are a series of research lines that overlap with this understanding of the core importance of body felt-sense and emotions. They include Gendlin's work on *"Focusing"*, Greenberg & colleagues' *"Emotion-focused therapy"*, research using the *"Experiencing scale"*, studies on deeper interpersonal connections, the whole area of burnout & vigour, and work on vitality & wellbeing. In some ways mindfulness & emotion have resonance with the old Apollonian-Dionysian dance, and there's danger in letting either of these energies become too dominant. Warm-blooded, aware, whole body-mind vitality is the challenge.

4.) trauma & 'emotional processing': Occasionally the 'freeloader passenger' thought or feeling repeatedly shouting in the back of the bus is due to trauma we have experienced earlier in our lives. In this situation it's good to keep driving the bus in the direction of our values, but when we have time it may be worth stopping to 'emotionally process' the troublesome memories with their associated – currently inappropriate – upsetting imagery and meaning. Evidence-based guidelines are clear on this – *"All people with PTSD should be offered a course of trauma-focused psychological treatment"*. But we also know that this kind of 'trauma memory' can easily occur after many different kinds of life event (not just the obviously traumatic ones). See, for example, *"Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder after non-traumatic events: evidence from an open population study"* and this year's *"Posttraumatic stress without trauma in children."* 'Low-tech' interventions like expressive writing can be helpful in this kind of situation. Writing methods are useful in tackling the backseat passenger voices of rumination. See *"Expressive writing buffers against maladaptive rumination"* and *"Benefits of expressive writing in lowering rumination and depressive symptoms"*. The lecture presentations detailed on the *"PTSD assessment, images, memories & information"* page of the Good Medicine website highlight the potential widespread relevance of these 'processing' interventions for many anxiety & depression problems. Clearly the 'full Monty' of trauma-focused psychotherapy will sometimes be needed, but often just writing or speaking it out will be very helpful.

"The bus driver metaphor" is rightly valued by many people and it is one of the metaphors I use most often in my work. This handout on *"The bus driver is warm-blooded"* will I hope set the metaphor in a broader context and make it even more useful as one in a series of potentially helpful ways of coping with intrusive thoughts and feelings. In broader wellbeing terms, mindfulness extends out beyond this 'therapeutic application' for rumination and worry, but this is not so much the focus of this handout.
