

NEWS AND TOOLS FOR HAPPINESS, LOVE, AND WISDOM

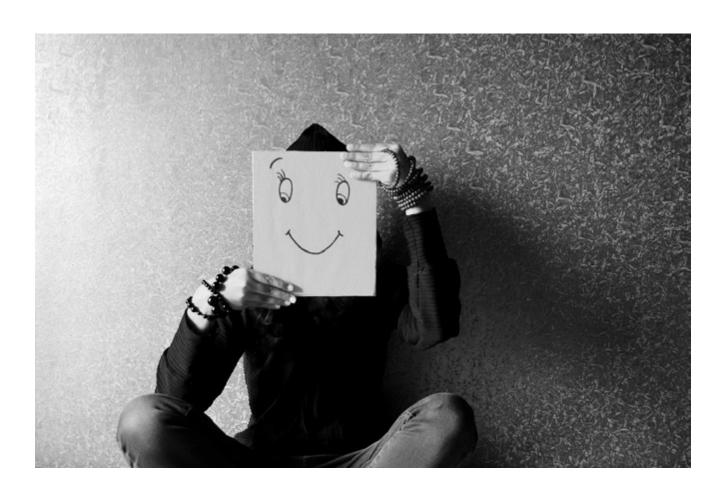
EMOTIONAL REGULATION SKILLS AND LEARNING TO TAME DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

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As human beings on this planet, one of the many challenges that we face is learning how to deal with difficult emotions, such as anger, sadness, frustration, fear and disappointment, without these emotions overtaking us and sweeping us away, or, alternatively, without avoiding these emotions entirely by suppressing them. Learning how to accept, be with, and regulate difficult emotions is an important step in our journey toward greater well-being.

In my book, The Transformative Power of Ten Minutes: An Eight Week Guide to Reducing Stress and Cultivating Well-being, I lay out an eight step path towards creating greater peace and joy, through 64 short, daily practices. The following is an edited excerpt from Chapter 5, (reprinted with permission from Wellbridge Books, an imprint of Six Degrees Publishing Group) which specifically addresses step five on the journey: coping with challenging emotions.

Many of us have learned, directly or indirectly, to push our difficult emotions away when they surface. Some of this is cultural or learned behavior: You may have been told at a young age to "stop crying and pull yourself together"; or to "cut it out and go to your room" when you were upset; or "big kids don't cry," or some other similar message. This tendency to avoid uncomfortable feelings is also human nature; there is a natural tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain. This is true not just for physical pain, but for emotional pain as well (which, by the way, can be experienced quite physically). It doesn't "feel good" to experience painful emotions, so we often avoid them, thinking this is a good thing for us.



The Cost of Avoiding Emotions

It turns out that avoiding our emotions can often do us more harm than good. Stuffing our feelings deep inside is a bit like putting a lid on a pot of boiling water. After a while, the pressure builds up and if it doesn't have a way to be released, the water can spill over, causing a mess. When we don't pay attention to our emotions, and push them away, they don't actually disappear. They just find some other way to come out. Take a moment to think about a time you may have tried to ignore or push feelings away. It may work for a short while, but usually the emotions end up reappearing with strong force in some way, such as in the form of a meltdown or explosion, an anger outburst, or perhaps as anxiety, depression, or physical illness.

The field of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy emphasizes that one of the biggest roadblocks we have to living a valued life is "experiential avoidance," that is, doing everything we can to avoid feeling painful or uncomfortable emotions (Hayes and Smith 2005). When we run up against uncomfortable feelings (stress, sadness, anxiety, pain), we often do everything in our power to get away from them, or to get rid of them. This often takes the form of unhelpful behaviors. Sometimes we numb out by unhealthy eating, alcohol, other addictive behaviors, or we lash out in anger, or isolate ourselves and avoid going places where we might feel uncomfortable – to

try to avoid experiencing our discomfort. When we do this, we often miss out on important parts of our lives and prevent ourselves from embracing the qualities that are most important to us, and from doing the things that matter most.

Emotional Hijacking

When we are not avoiding our emotions in some form, many of us can experience being "hijacked" by our emotions, as they take over and spiral us out of control. Daniel Goleman coined this term "emotional hijacking" in his book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) to refer to the process by which the more primitive and emotional part of our brain can take over and bypass communication to the higher "thinking" parts of our brain. We have all probably experienced this in some form, perhaps when caught up in a moment of road rage, an argument, being stuck in traffic, being panicked or worried about something, or other situations where we are overtaken by the intensity of our emotions. When that occurs, it is

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difficult to think clearly, and often, reason and perspective go out the door. This loss of reason and perspective, in combination with the intensity of our emotions, can cause us to react in ways we later regret. There is a good explanation for this from a physiological perspective, and it is helpful to understand what is happening in our brains, so that we can understand what we are trying to "rewire".

Here is a simplified explanation. As we go about our day we receive continual messages from the environment that get processed by a part of our brain called the thalamus. The thalamus sorts out these messages and sends them to both the limbic system, which is the emotional center of our brains, and to the cortex and neocortex, which are the higher thinking parts of our brains. The limbic system is constantly evaluating for perceived danger, through a small organ called the amygdala, and also through the help of the hippocampus. When information is interpreted as emotionally charged by the amygdala, it goes directly to the body's alarm system responsible for turning on the "fight or flight" reaction, and to the brainstem, and, in essence bypasses the



neocortex (which receives the information only after the alarm system is triggered). Thus, the "fight or flight response" gets turned on and we prepare to handle this "emergency" before us (Goleman 1975). Remember, the limbic system responds not only to life- threatening danger, but also to anything it perceives as danger (which could be a conversation that puts us on the defensive, a traffic jam that is preventing us from traveling where we need to be, a look from another person that we believe means they are thinking badly of us, etc.). This system works wonders in a true life-threatening emergency, when we don't have the luxury of that split second that it takes the higher thinking part of our brain, the cortex, to process what is happening. If a car is coming at us, we simply jump out of the way. That extra split second that it would have taken us to discern the speed of the oncoming car and evaluate the situation more accurately could have cost us our life. However, that same split second that it takes for information to get to our cortex might be especially helpful when we are in an argument with someone. It could help us stop and evaluate the situation before becoming emotionally hijacked and blurting out something we later regret.

Learning to Be With Intense Emotions

So you may be able to appreciate now that being able to stop and pause when we are overwhelmed by intense emotions can be immensely helpful. It can mean the difference between getting swept away by that emotion entirely, and bringing the cortex "on line" to help put things in perspective and choose how we want to react. When we learn to be present with difficult emotions we



WISE BRAIN BULLETIN 11.2 · 2017 · PAGE 5

create that pause, or "moment of hesitation" (as my brother calls it), to sit and be with what is there. I often like to share this quote by Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychologist, with my patients: "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom." By taking a moment to stop, breathe, feel and be with our emotions, we can help create that powerful space.

Learning to stop and be with intense emotions as they arise also prevents us from resorting to our more habitual response (for many of us) of avoiding feelings that are uncomfortable, or pushing them away. When we learn to be with our emotions as they arise we allow them to go through their natural life cycle and move through us, without getting stuck or having to come out in other ways. In addition, as Miriam Greenspan (2003) describes, when we have the courage to be present with "dark" emotions such as fear, despair, and grief, we can experience a kind of alchemy and transformation that allows us to also feel gratitude, faith, and joy.

As you will get to experience shortly, mindfulness skills are essential in our toolkit for emotional regulation. As Ronald Siegel, in his book *The Mindfulness Solution* (2010) explains so well, the more we can increase our capacity to bear uncomfortable emotions, and to be present with whatever is in our direct experience, the more ease we can go through life with, and the less suffering we experience. So to emphasize, the goal is NOT to make difficult feelings go away. It is our goal to try and increase our capacity to experience and bear intense emotions, without being swept away by them.

When I practice this with my patients, we focus on learning to be present with difficult emotions by imagining that we welcome the feelings in, befriend them, allow them to be just as they are. This is often quite the opposite of people's initial inclination, which is to turn away from these feelings. While at first this may seem quite difficult, most people are surprised that it is a relief not to put so much energy into making the feelings go away. They realize that by befriending and turning their attention toward their difficult emotions they are NOT swallowed up by them; in fact, they often experience some sense of ease. I like to use the scene from the movie "The Wizard of Oz", when Dorothy meets the "great and terrible Oz", to illustrate a point. All along, the wizard has been built up to be some scary, giant monster. When toward the end of the movie the curtain is pulled back, Dorothy discovers that, in fact, the wizard is just a small, meek, ordinary man. So it often is with our feelings. We go to great lengths to avoid our anger, sadness, and fears. However, when we actually allow ourselves to be present to those emotions, we are surprised to realize that we can handle them and bear them. They are no longer so scary to us.

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I encourage people to think about sitting with their difficult emotions in the same way you might sit and listen to a good friend — with compassion and non-judgment - and in a space where you are receptive to truly listen (not to berate, advise, invalidate, or otherwise tell the person not to feel what they are feeling). In fact, think for a moment about a time when you shared intense emotions with a good friend who was able to simply listen openly to you. Chances are, having this accepting space to share your emotions was quite helpful, and enabled you to feel calmer. This is what it is like when we can sit mindfully with our feelings. For some people, imagining a parent sitting lovingly with a small child who is feeling sad, anxious, or angry can be a helpful image to bring to mind when sitting with our feelings. We are similar to that loving, accepting parent, and our feelings are like the small child, who simply needs to be accepted, held and heard.

Because emotions can become quite intense, and at times overwhelming, it is helpful to have some ways to create a feeling of safety, security and stability in our bodies, from which we can observe our emotions. The first exercise below will offer that. Please note, if you are currently experiencing very intense emotions (e.g., from a loss, trauma, etc.) it may be important to do this exercise with a therapist, or choose less intense emotions with which to practice. The second exercise below will give you an opportunity to become more aware of how emotions arise for you throughout the day, and will offer the reminder to call up a feeling of stability in your body and "anchor" yourself as you experience any difficult emotions arising. Each of these exercises has an accompanying worksheet to go with it, and the first exercise has an audio recording to accompany it. You can find the audio and worksheets at https://bethkurland.com/samples/.

Exercise One: Dropping Your Anchor

You will need to set aside five to ten minutes for the initial part of this exercise. Follow along with the audio if you like. Get into a comfortable seated position during a time when there are no distractions around you. Allow your awareness to turn to your breathing, and begin to follow your breath as it comes in, and as it goes out. Allow your shoulders to drop, allow your face to relax, as you follow your breath in and out. As you follow your breathing, begin to imagine a ship in the middle of the ocean, and see a big, strong anchor that goes from the ship, down into the water, and deep into the ocean floor. This anchor keeps the ship safe and secure, no matter what the ocean waters are like above. Imagine your breath as a kind of anchor; as you exhale slowly, drop your anchor and see it take hold on the floor beneath you.

Continue to follow your breathing as it comes in and as it goes out. As thoughts arise in your mind, allow them to pass by as you bring your awareness back to your breathing. Imagine for a moment that the waters are calm above you. Take a moment to see if you can find that place of calmness within your own body. See if you can locate a feeling of safety and security inside yourself. You might even recall a time when you felt very safe and secure. Think about that time and notice



what happens in your body as you do. You might also imagine going to a familiar place where you feel peaceful, calm and safe (e.g., at the beach). If you can't feel this inner stability or safety, that's OK. Do not force it. Just hold open the possibility for it as you continue focusing on your breathing and visualize the anchor of the ship.

When you are ready, change the scene slightly to one of rough waters at the surface of the ocean. See if you can use your breathing to find your own inner anchor, that sense of calmness that lies beneath the waters if you go deep enough. See if you can imagine the waters

rough at the surface, but calm deep underneath. Continue to hold an image of an anchor in your mind, and the sense of stability the anchor represents.

Now imagine that there is a storm at sea. Visualize the storm in all its intensity, and then see the storm passing, as the ship remains safe because it is anchored securely to the ocean floor. As you imagine the storm, see if you can find your "center," that calm, stable place within, and again notice what it feels like in your body. Use your breath to anchor you by returning again and again to your inhalation and exhalation.

Now, when you feel ready, call up a difficult emotion that you are currently experiencing or one that you experienced recently. Choose something that is not too intense or overwhelming: perhaps a recent frustration or irritation, disappointment or stress. See if you can allow this feeling to be present while you continue to focus on your breathing. Visualize your breath as an anchor, and simply be with whatever feeling is there without needing to change it or make it go away. Stay with this for several minutes, simply being present to whatever feelings arise. Bring your awareness back into the room when you are ready.

As you go through your day today, notice the emotions that arise and see if you can name them. Several times throughout the day, stop and imagine dropping your anchor and bringing your awareness to your breathing for about a minute or so. Notice what you experience in your body when you do that.

Example: Bernie considers himself a "high strung" person and often feels tense and somewhat anxious. He initially resisted the idea of this exercise, but once he tried it he discovered that it really helped him to feel an internal calmness that he rarely experiences in his day. He liked the idea of allowing the storm to pass while seeing the ship securely anchored in the water. He recognized how easy it is for his own ship to get swept away in the storms when he gets upset. He called up a feeling of irritation that he felt over a recent argument he had with his spouse. Bernie practiced staying "anchored" as he allowed the irritation to be there, and found it helpful to be able to practice not being swept away by his irritation. During his day he noticed irritation, anxiety, worry, anger, and frustration arise. Because he was more aware, he caught the feelings earlier on, before they built up to full intensity. He found it helpful to take a minute several times throughout the day to drop his anchor, and was surprised by the way he could call up that feeling of stability in his body, even during these brief pauses.



Exercise Two: The Hurricane Exercise - Catching Difficult Emotions

In this exercise, you will have the opportunity to try your hand at meteorology. Your job is to observe your emotions closely throughout the day as if you were a meteorologist observing a hurricane. Your job is not to make any predictions, but simply to notice, label, and narrate to yourself what you see. When you are aware of a challenging emotion arising, name it (e.g., frustration, anger, rage, sadness) and then decide how intense it is using a 1-5 scale — similar to rating a hurricane category I through 5 (category I being mild and category 5 being the most out of control and intense). As you notice challenging feelings in your body, see if you can call up the image of the ship and its anchor while you are experiencing the feelings. Be aware of yourself as separate from your feelings, reminding yourself that you are not your feelings; they are simply a transient experience within you. Like the hurricane or storm, they will pass. Take some time to write down your observations on your worksheet.

Example: Petra's most challenging moment of the day was in the morning when her daughter had a meltdown after she was unable to find any clothes that she wanted to wear. At the same time, Petra needed to get her and her daughter out the door on time so she would not be late for work. She noted that she was feeling intensely frustrated, and rated this as a category 3 storm. She started to fly off the handle and have her own meltdown in reaction to her daughter's

behavior. She remembered the exercise and shut herself in the bathroom for a moment and visualized a huge storm at sea. She took several conscious breaths and imagined dropping her anchor so as not to be completely swept away. This helped to prevent the hurricane from being upgraded to a category 4 storm. As she was able to experience a momentary calm within the storm (like being in the eye of a hurricane, she imagined), she was able to think clearly enough to realize that her own huge reaction would just make things worse, and she was able to keep her behavior in check.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth Kurland, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and author of the book *The Transformative Power of Ten Minutes: An Eight Week Guide to Reducing Stress and Cultivating Well-Being.* She is also the author of three upcoming children's books and accompanying games for each, designed to help children learn practical tools to manage difficult emotions, face challenges, and cultivate positivity. (These books and games are scheduled to be released at the end of 2017 through Childswork Childsplay.) In addition, she writes poetry

to inspire mindfulness. Beth has been in clinical practice since 1994 and provides evidence-based treatment to people across the lifespan, with a focus on using mindfulness and mind-body strategies for whole person health and wellness. To enjoy free meditation videos and audios, visit https://BethKurland.com.



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Meditators say experience is like weather.

Watch the clouds move across the mountain top, break apart filtering light, reforming fullness, gray, bright sun, wind chill moving changing

potent while there, and then gone

Watch

nothing lasts forever

All night I have been waiting for the sound of rain

It is humid in our bedroom I turn on the ceiling fan hoping air circulating will help

me return to sleep.

No rain comes during the night



I wake up in stiffness yawning stretching mobilizing in the moments of knowing heaviness of awakening

and then

before I leave the covers

Thunder deafening resounding shakes the house so close it rushes into our room demanding that we hear it

lightening jolts sharp flickering

I start to think about how I will get where I need to go and not be drenched in the pounding rain hitting our house, filling our pool, soaking thirsty dry grass

mind organizing the day around clothing

Some people might just pull on boots while I tensely count

just how many pairs of shoes might I need to track back and forth from my car, to
the market, gym, office. Like packing for a trip, will I have everything I need, hold

up under all conditions?

My mind wanders to my husband driving miles of freeway to his workplace please call me when you get there so I'll know you are safe. I worry when rain coats the oily streets cars skidding through slickness.

Thunder pounds again as if it lives with us consuming the bedroom, windows rattling while lightening streaks the room in a jarring flash

I wonder what it would be like to be on retreat in pouring rain without a phone reporting hourly weather updates?

People's lives don't stop when the clouds burst when wind tangles the trees.

they go on, adding layers of clothes, dripping umbrellas twisted from huge gusts of wind, finding their way to where they need to be

wait it out sitting through while going on

As quickly as its enormous pound bursts the clouds hanging it is over

I drive in dryness, sun breaking, clouds cluster but hold steady gray patches of blue quiet settles

soundless we wait for the next round reminding us that whatever travels by will come and go and come again



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nina Asher, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and child development specialist in private practice in Los Angeles for over 35 years. In the past 15 years, she has been a practitioner of Vipassana meditation. She sees children, adolescents, parents, and individual adults for therapy, integrating psychodynamic/relational psychotherapy with insight meditation. She writes poems and personal essays about the therapy/meditation experience. drninaasher.com

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OCD MIND

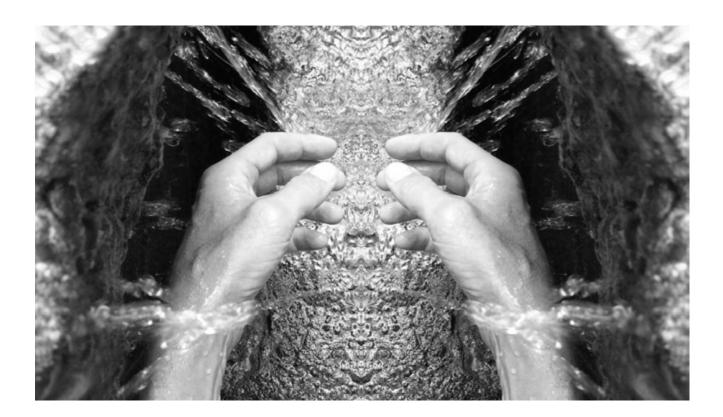
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I have written two previous articles for the Wise Brain Bulletin — "Impermanence: A Model of Mental Illness Based on Loss" (2015) and "Making Friends with Emptiness" (2016). They have been an attempt to link the secular practice of mindfulness and its application as a therapeutic tool to Buddhist mindfulness practice and theory as well as other meditative and philosophical traditions. This is the final one of these articles and is an attempt to link what I define as "OCD mind" to what is termed the "grasping mind" in Buddhism, the "commanding self" in Sufism and the "egoic mind" by Eckhart Tolle. This structure or way of thinking is defined by each of these teachings as one of the root causes of suffering. I believe that it has a key role in mental dysfunction but I will define it with reference to obsessional illnesses, as many people experience these illnesses, have traits related to them, or know someone who does. Hopefully this will allow people to better understand these issues, including how they may relate to a broader spectrum of difficulties and how mindfulness can help address them.

The article is divided into five sections. The first is a brief overview of obsessional illnesses, the second a summary of what I believe are the defining features of the OCD mind, the third how this relates to mindfulness, the fourth how it relates to wider issues and, finally, the fifth where I discuss how to address the OCD mind.

Obsessional Illnesses

By OCD I mean Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, the well know psychiatric disorder. This normally gives rise to thoughts of being excessively tidy or organised, however, as a psychiatric disorder it can be very serious. It is based around an obsessional focus on some form of threat and compulsive behaviour to try and eliminate or reduce this threat. One of the most common types is fear of contamination resulting in excessive handwashing. Another common form is excessively checking locks, light switches, plugs, etc. due to a fear of missing something dangerous. Extreme forms of OCD can be due to highly upsetting, intrusive thoughts, such as harm being caused to a loved one or a person doing something against their moral code, like committing a crime or an obscene act. A person with these difficulties can believe that just having the thoughts can be enough to make them happen, thereby provoking the compulsive behaviour designed to avoid them coming true. Behaviours can be ritualistic, for example, counting, saying words or carrying out behaviour repetitively to nullify the thoughts.



There are other similar illnesses such as "health anxiety" where a person is obsessed with having a physical illness and will excessively research and seek medical treatment for symptoms that have been misinterpreted as evidence for illness. For example, a person may believe that their headaches are due to a brain tumour, or they may have an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia and fear gaining weight, and will obsessively focus on calorie consumption and engage in

behaviours to avoid weight gain, such as diet restriction, purging and vomiting. "Social anxiety" is where an individual will excessively worry about what other people think of them and focus on facets of themselves that they believe will result in negative responses, such as their appearance or how they talk and interact with others. The catch-all of obsessional illnesses is Generalised Anxiety Disorder where a person can worry about literally anything.

Other psychiatric disorders, such as depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), can also have obsessional traits. In depression it is common for a person to have ruminative, negative thoughts that they are constantly focused on. In PTSD a person has intrusive thoughts and images related to trauma and can experience ruminations associated to guilt if they feel responsible for what happened, for example, causing an accident and/or not being able to save someone. Psychosis can involve obsessions too, in that a person who is psychotic may be preoccupied with delusional beliefs.

Defining Features of the OCD Mind

All obsessional illnesses have similar underlying processes which I would define as making up the OCD mind. There is an obsessional focus in each, which results in hypervigilance and a distorted perception of risk. So, for example, someone with a contamination fear will perceive highly dangerous germs as being everywhere or someone with anorexia will perceive themselves

as fat even if they are significantly underweight. There is an intolerance of uncertainty so no amount of reassurance is enough to ease anxiety because "what if it's wrong?" This often manifests in health anxiety where, say, a person may have had repeated medical tests showing no evidence of illness but they continue to think that something may have been missed. This intolerance of uncertainty can be defined as a compulsive "need to know" and an attempt at controlling risk because the less you know about something

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the less you are able to control it. Ironically, compulsive behaviours feel outside of a person's control, which is why they are defined as compulsions and treated as illnesses. They also tend to exacerbate the problem. For example, with Generalised Anxiety Disorder worry is seen as form of control but actually increases anxiety and the need to worry, creating a vicious cycle. Perfectionism is common to many people presenting with obsessional illnesses and is another form of control aimed at avoiding failure yet it's counter-productive in that it creates unachievable standards resulting in the feeling of failure.

OCD Mind and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is derived from Buddhism which states that that everything is impermanent and therefore attachment causes suffering (Dalai Lama 1998). The resulting experience is loss and human beings have been shown to be more sensitive to loss than gain, so for example when taking financial risks in general people will only do so if the gains significantly outweigh the losses (Kahneman 2011). Loss comes in diverse forms; loss of life, health, property, relationships (via death, separation or conflict), esteem, hopes, dreams, purpose or meaning. All threats relate to loss as you cannot feel threatened if you do not have something to lose. Failure is also a form of a loss as success and failure can be translated into winning and "losing." A person who believes they are a failure may refer to themselves as a "loser."

Eckhart Tolle (2006) states that the egoic mind feeds off opposition as it can define itself clearly in this way: I am good not bad, I am strong not weak. I would suggest that in defining the ego in the form of the "OCD mind" the opposition is "loss" and the OCD mind defines itself by avoiding loss. For example, in an eating disorder the person defines "good" as being thin. They may believe that being thin means they are more attractive and likeable and they avoid anything that could cause the "loss" of being thin. This focus on loss is intensified because of the increased sensitivity to it, which may be why it is so difficult to overcome obsessional beliefs.

The ego could itself be seen as a result of the OCD mind, as it could be argued that it is a mental projection made by "obsessing" about the self. For example, thoughts such as "what do others think of me?", "am I good enough?", "I should be doing this," "I need to have that," etc. The reason the ego is defined as a negative concept in many spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, is because it leads to attachment, resulting in fear, craving, greed, anger, pain, etc. (King 1999). It could be argued that there is an inflated sense of self in OCD because it is common in the disorder for a person to have an excessive sense of personal responsibility and control.

Emptiness is a key concept in Buddhist mindfulness theory because it is believed that reality is essentially empty, as each part is dependent on everything else. In other words, when you remove the parts the whole disappears or is shown to be empty. This is referred to as Dependent Origination. It relates to another Buddhist concept – "non-self" - which is essentially the opposite of having a soul and suggests that if you take away the senses, mental faculties, emotions, etc. you are left with nothing that would create a sense of self (Gowans 2003). In Buddhism this realisation is viewed as positive as it leads to non-attachment and a state of inner peace (Goode and Sander 2013). Emptiness in secular culture is normally thought of as a negative state related to depression and grief (Downs 2004; Sanders 2008). We experience it following a significant loss, for example the death of a loved one (Sanders 2008), when we are lonely, and, to a lesser extent, when we are bored (Klonsky 2008). It could be argued therefore that this is an underlying feeling that we only become aware of when we do not have sensory, mental or emotional stimulation. In this case to avoid this feeling we may engage in compulsive, stimulus-seeking behavior perhaps through drug experimentation, gambling, over achieving, always needing to be busy, or immoderate contact with others. This need for excessive stimuli could be seen as relating to the Buddhist concept of non-self because as Dependent Origination suggests, for something to exist it can only exist in relation to something else meaning that without stimuli to relate to there would be no sense of self. This could be very frightening and a negative sense of self, resulting from pain and suffering could even be preferable to it. OCD mind could be seen as

a form of defense against inner emptiness because having an intense focus, such as an obsession, provides a powerful stimulus to avoid emptiness. This again links to Buddhist belief where the ego is considered to be false because it is seen as an attempt to create or grasp (as in the "grasping self") at a permanent sense of self as a defense against impermanence (Rinpoche 1995).

Manifestations of OCD Mind in the Wider World

OCD mind, as I define it, could relate to areas outside of mental health. For example, most people know someone (may be themselves) who is obsessional about hobbies, interests, work, relationships, etc. Some people described as "control freaks" fear losing control in case something bad happens. This could be seen on a societal level as an obsession with data and "knowing" to achieve control. There can be diverse forms of this, such as companies wanting as much consumer data as possible to be able to increase their profits, to police states wanting as much knowledge about their citizens so as to be able to control them more effectively. The attempt to escape inner emptiness via excessive stimuli can also be seen in consumer culture and capitalism.



The use of ritualistic behaviour as an attempt to avoid negative consequences can be seen in some religious practices, and superstitious behaviours, such as making the sign of the cross in response to sin or throwing salt over the shoulder after it has been spilled, are common practices to avoid "bad luck."

Prejudice could be seen as a way of defining oneself against an opposing concept, "I am a man not a woman," "white not black," "Sunni not Shia," and can result in compulsive behaviour to eliminate

the other through discrimination, aggression, violence, etc. Religious or political movements that define themselves via opposition, such as the Far Right or Islamic Extremism, could be seen to be partly fuelled by the OCD mind as they create meaning and purpose, which is a defense against inner emptiness. It may also explain "blame culture" as this avoids any threat to the self or loss of self-esteem by externalising responsibility for negative situations and outcomes.

I would argue that that the OCD mind is not entirely negative - many of the great achievements in science, art, philosophy, politics, entertainment, sport, etc. show the obsessional focus and drive for perfection that enables incredible heights to be reached. However, I would suggest that many high achievers, for example, Newton, Tolstoy, Jung, Churchill, Van Gogh, John Lennon, Tiger Woods, have experienced negative impacts on their mental health. Is it possible for the OCD mind to be a tool that can be harnessed and utilized when appropriate but grounded in a more stable state of mental health so that it does not become pathological or dominant?

How to Address OCD Mind

Mindfulness would be the obvious answer here - by learning to be aware of our inner processes we can recognise when the OCD mind is being triggered and take action to address it. So, for example, someone with a contamination fear could learn to become aware that they are overestimating the risk. They could expose themselves to contaminants, by not compulsively washing



WISE BRAIN BULLETIN 11.2 · 2017 · PAGE 21

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

or taking protective measures such as wearing gloves, to prove to themselves that they are not as dangerous as they believe.

If the trigger for the OCD mind is loss then learning to develop healthier attitudes to loss may be helpful (for example, learning to see failure as an integral part of the learning process rather than as something catastrophic or self-defining). Accepting inner

emptiness can help with the escape from excessive stimuli, allowing us to detach from our everchanging thoughts and feelings to instead connect with our inner nature (which does not change) as we work on assimilating loss. This is in keeping with Buddhist and Taoist conceptions of emptiness as well as Eckhart Tolle's description of inner stillness (Rinpoche 1995;Tzu 2015;Tolle 2003). Examples of this would be learning not to push inner emptiness away when we experience it or learning to rest in it when practicing formal meditation. Objectless meditation involves *not* focusing on the breath or a mantra, or only using such focuses until the mind is aware of the experience of inner emptiness. Emptiness can then become the focus, or object, of meditation. This is described in Dzogchen, a form of Tibetan Buddhism, as "the View" and stablising this form of perception into daily life is the aim of the practice. The emptiness in this experience is described as "luminous" and "radiant" reflecting the positive state it is seen in (Rinpoche 1995).

Two states of mind that could be referred to as the antithesis of OCD mind are the Zen concept of "Beginner's Mind" and the psychological concept of "flow." Beginner's mind refers to a non-conceptual state of mind where there are no preconceived ideas or habits and the mind is "empty." This is described in detail in Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind (Suzuki 2009). This links to the Sufi concept of "polishing the mirror" where the heart is polished to remove the impurities of the commanding self (Ghazali 2012). Flow refers to a state of concentration where a person is absorbed in their experience, resulting in heightened performance and enjoyment. A key element in the state of flow is that a person feels in control but does not worry about being in control or losing control (Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Flow is detailed in the work of Mihay Csikszentmihalyi. If OCD mind is a barrier to achieving flow, or Beginner's mind and loss is the trigger for it, I would suggest the most important way of avoiding this would to be less loss-focused. This would fit with one of the key facets of mindfulness practice, which is developing attention control (Hanson 2009).





This could significantly increase our enjoyment of life, as when we are excessively focused on loss it negatively impacts our ability to enjoy the present. This relates to the work of psychologist Dr. Rick Hanson where he speaks about encouraging the brain to access the responsive mode, when it is calm and in a state of well-being, in contrast to the reactive mode, when it is in a threat state and experiencing fear, anger and distress (Hanson 2013). An example of how to achieve this would be to become aware of when we are overly-focused on loss and to use mindfulness techniques, such as focusing on the breath, to shift our attention until we are able to access the responsive mode and then re-engage with whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Summary

As with my previous articles, what is presented here is not new but an attempt to describe preexisting concepts in a contemporary form related to mindfulness practice. My hope would be that it may enable people to use these ideas to achieve greater happiness and fulfillment in their lives. In my experience the traditions that espouse these ideas still have lots to offer to the secular practice of mindfulness as well as the treatment of mental illness in general.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Read is an occupational therapist in a community mental health team in the UK, and a frequent contributor to the *Wise Brain Bulletin*. He practices CBT as part of his clinical work and is interested in philosophy, particularly Eastern philosophy. He has meditated for many years and has found this very beneficial.



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SKILLFUL MEANS



Your Skillful Means, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Clarifying Emotions

Purpose/Effects

Many people find it hard to know what they are feeling. This practice is a simple, effective way to learn to know which emotions you are experiencing.

Because the technique encourages you to notice the body sensations associated with the emotion, it will build up a deep familiarity with your emotional states.

Method

Summary

Scan your body and label and emotions that you notice.

Long Version

- 1. Settle into a comfortable meditation posture.
- 2. Breathing normally, bring your attention to your emotions. Notice if you are feeling any emotions, no matter how faintly.

- 3. Once you detect an emotion, see if you can label which emotion it is. Here is a short, partial list of some of the possibilities:
 - Joy
 - Anger
 - Interest
 - Fear
 - Sadness
 - Love
 - Shame
 - Embarrassment
 - Pride
 - Guilt
- 4. Try to stay simple and basic with these emotional labels. It is OK to guess, if you are not sure which exact emotion you are feeling.
- 5. Once you feel you know which emotion you are feeling, label it mentally. Keep making the label every 5 seconds or so, and then feeling the emotion in your body. So for example, if you are feeling sadness, you would label it like this "Sadness... Sadness... Sadness" in a gentle, matter-of-fact way every few seconds. With each label, you feel with your body the sensations of that emotion.
- 6. If you notice more than one emotion happening at the same time, you can either just focus on one, or you can "stack" the labels. So for example, if you were feeling both joy and love, you could label them as "Joy and Love." And so on.
- 7. Continue labeling the emotions for as long as you wish.

History

Meditating on emotions is a traditional part of Vipassana practice in Buddhism. It is, for example, one of the four main techniques covered in the Vissudhimagga (The Path to Purity), an important Buddhist text.

The version presented here is a summary of a practice given by American Buddhist teacher Shinzen Young.

Notes

Do not get caught up in every nuance of differences in labeling the emotions. For example, in common English, there is a big difference between anxiety and terror. However, for the purposes of this exercise, they are both simply labeled as "Fear." The point of the practice is not to get perfectly accurate labels, but rather to get a handle on what emotions are currently occurring for you, and how they express in the body.

This practice should be repeated daily for at least 10 minutes over the course of at least a month to really gain the benefit.

SEE ALSO

What Is Meditation

Meditation Posture

EXTERNAL LINKS

Shinzen Young's website



Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.