



## Managing Our Monkey Mind

### The neuroscience of mindfulness – Week 5

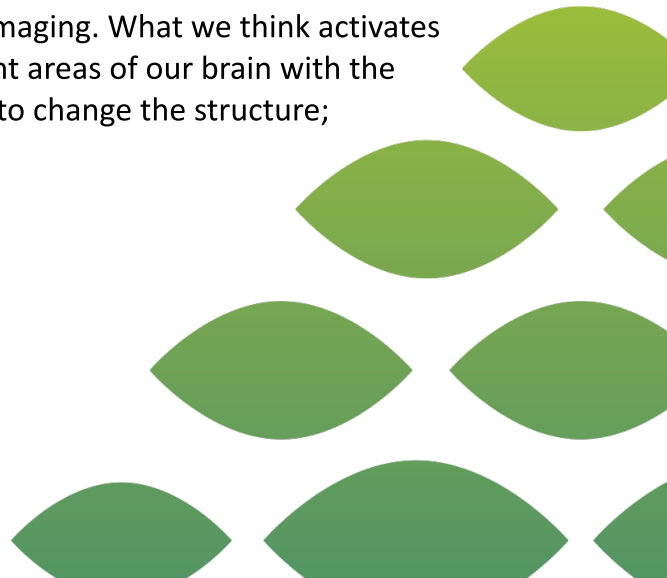
**Being mindful** is like using a flashlight so you can make your way to the bathroom in the dark. Awareness is what you are able to see at the end of that beam of light.

In Monkey Mind we've been honing our mindful flashlight skills by pointing the beam of our attention at different objects: our breath, our body, our thoughts, our emotions.

- Pointing the beam of our attention to our body and breath grounds us in real time and brings us back down to earth when our mind has carried us off.

- From the real-time place of grounded-ness, we can then point the beam of our attention to our thoughts and emotions, allowing us to see the conditions that give rise to stress and frustration or joy and wellbeing on a moment-by-moment basis.

This kind of awareness is what allows us to manage ourselves more skillfully and better relate to others. That's how these skills show up in our lives. What's interesting is how they show up in our brains, which can be seen with neuroimaging. What we think activates different areas of our brain with the power to change the structure;



strengthening some areas and weakening others.

- Repeated reactive, fear-based thoughts reinforce our primal limbic system where threat is registered. The more this area is reinforced the likely this will be the way we respond.
- When the mind wanders, a number of areas of the brain light up including an area called the default mode network, which is associated with rumination and self-referential thinking. (Perhaps a hint as to the content of our thoughts when our mind wanders off!)
- When we become aware that our mind has wandered and we bring our attention back to an intentional place, functions of the brain in the prefrontal cortex – the executive center of our brain – are activated and strengthened.

Our brains change based on our behaviors and our thoughts. That they are able to change is a phenomenon called

neuroplasticity. It's this neuroplasticity that gives mindfulness its power to transform, on some level, who we are.

Not only can we use mindfulness to help regulate our emotions, make better decisions and experience life in a more balanced and even way, we can use mindfulness to improve our relationships. For instance, think about how it feels to have someone focus their beam of attention on you when you are trying to tell them something as opposed to allowing their attention to be pulled away to what are apparently more interesting subjects.

Specific emotional responses are also trainable skills – or trainable bad habits, as the case may be. And while some people may be more automatically wired to respond compassionately and some are more wired to empathetically feel people's pain and others are more wired to fix people's pain and others are more wired to protect themselves against people's pain, any of these behaviors and the companion emotional responses can be

We are the flashlight shining awareness on that which we point.

brought further forward and reinforced through repetition. Take compassion. We can intentionally decide to look at a person or situation with an attitude of understanding, care and kindness and the feeling of compassion or a softening of the heart will most likely follow.

At the same time, I don't want to over-promise. We can work hard to develop more mindfulness skill and our life will be substantially better for it, but it doesn't necessarily mean we can turn ourselves into a person who never over-reacts or melts down or defies reason or bulldozes unconsciously over people. Heavens, I cringe to think of what my primary care doctor would have to say if I tried to pass myself off as a master of mindful self-possession should she be reading this. What she doesn't know, however, is who I would be without at least some level of deliberate development of greater mindfulness!

This much I can promise you; anything you put into developing your mindfulness skill will serve you well.

Neuroplasticity says our brains are trainable. Mindfulness is training for the brain.

## Ultimate takeaway

Of all the ways mindfulness can enhance the experience of life, one of the ways it has best served me is helping me realize there is a part of me that can step back and watch myself as if I'm a spectator of a never ending television series named, "Life with Elizabeth." The benefit of being able to keep one part of ourselves separate from the emotional experience we are having provides a profoundly useful level of psychological distance that allows for clearer thinking and also the ability to have compassion and understanding for ourselves, something we often aren't able to do when we're in the throes of negative feelings.

We can strengthen this spectator part of us by giving it voice and having it label what he/she sees. For example, if I am in the midst of a bout of anxiety, the spectator part of me that is observing this anxiety would simply say, "I am witnessing anxiety."

Can you feel the sense of separation that would be created when this spectator part of you makes this sort of third person observation? There is so much opportunity in that space between you and your emotion.

And so when we say that **we are the flashlight shining awareness on what we point it at**, the "we" we are talking about is this observing spectator. More and more we will start to identify with that spectator. That spectator will be who come to think of as us.

When the breath is unsteady, all is unsteady.

When the breath is still; all is still.

Control the breath carefully:

Inhalation gives strength and a controlled body;  
retention gives steadiness of mind and longevity;  
exhalation purifies body and spirit.

--Gorak Sasatha Kam