

Introduction

In the face of the ongoing and relentless presence of Covid, as human beings we have limited tolerance for its accompanying uncertainty and adverse impact on human well being - - ours, our patients and our loved ones.

The human brain and nervous system do not like uncertainty and have a strong reaction to it. That reaction is part of our survival capacity. Our systems also have the capacity to return to a balanced or centered state.

The relentless uncertainty of Covid often keeps us in perpetual reactivity, protecting ourselves from threats. The physiological characteristics of reactivity to threat can include escalated heart rate, dilated pupils, shallow breathing and muscular tension - - all of these are useful in protecting ourselves from physical threats. This protection system of ours evolved over hundreds of millions of years and cannot distinguish between physical threats and threats to our emotional well being.

Thus, the above physiological symptoms arise often AND when we feel threatened relentlessly as with Covid, the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) part of the brain, where thinking occurs and where our capacity to connect with others resides, can be DISCONNECTED, go offline.

Cultivating Personal Resilience

getting the PFC back on line, so we are centered mentally and emotionally.

- Cultivating: denotes the notion of an ongoing process of focusing on the important ingredients of resilience and creating conditions for growing and strengthening
- Personal: suggests that the focus will be on individual concerns and needs and also that individual efforts matter to the team
- Resilience: we all know that in life we will get knocked down again and again and it is how we bounce back that matters - - in fact one of the significant mindfulness works on resilience is titled "Bouncing Back"

Mindfulness

Not being overwhelmed by circumstances; staying in the present moment, skillful and connected.

Extensive neuroscience research over the last 15 years has shown that mindfulness practices are highly effective tools for bouncing back, getting the PFC back on line.

Much of mindfulness practice is designed to change our relationship to what is going on in our lives in the moment. So much of life, such as Covid, is beyond our control, largely because it is external, arising from a complex constellation of causes and conditions.

What is within our control is 'how we show up' moment by moment. Mindfulness practices focus on being skillful in how we show up.

An essential aspect of mindfulness is **SPACE**. Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of "Man's Search for Meaning," noted: 'between stimulus and response there is a space; in that space is where we can choose; that space is our freedom.'

Having access to Space enables us to move past our initial reactivity that arises from instinct and habit to formulating a skillful response. Skillful in the sense of relying on our knowledge and wisdom, not being harmful and being able to consider the impact of our response on others.

Mindfulness practices for cultivating Space

These are the fundamental skills; they are similar to 'playing the scales' if you are a musician

Three types of meditation:

1. **Concentration** - - also known as breath practice because we direct our attention to our breathing, especially focusing on how breathing manifests in our bodies; flow of air, rising and falling of chest, expanding and contracting of belly; this practice strengthens our capacity for directing our attention in any given moment, regardless of external circumstances
2. **Body Scan/Awareness** - - we direct our attention to the sensations in our bodies as we scan from head to toe; when we notice a specific sensation, we focus there, observing what happens to the sensation and then continue the scan; this practice strengthens our capacity for connecting with our bodies, especially as sources of information about our well being and to ground ourselves in the present moment
3. **Connecting with Kindness** - - although we often have the illusion of our being separate, the underlying reality, whether from ancient wisdom or contemporary science is that everything is connected; *interconnectedness*; this practice strengthens our sense of connectedness, especially with an emphasis on kindness; when there is stress, when we feel separate, kindness in how we treat each other is essential.

You also will receive access to recorded Guided Meditations of 5-7 minutes for each of these three types of meditation, available to download onto one of your devices.

AN EXPERIMENT: the research shows that listening to a guided meditation once a day, most days a week for the next 3-4 weeks will change your brain, strengthening the prefrontal cortex. Give this a try and see what happens for you.

Additional in the moment Mindfulness Practices:

- **Recognizing and Naming** - - applying the capacity developed in Body Scans, we are able to note the physiological signs of stress and anxiety, of reactivity to a threat and the emotions that have been triggered; by naming them (e.g., saying 'there is tension present or the heart is beating faster or the brain is not thinking clearly, or there is anger or frustration present) then we are distancing ourselves from the experience, creating Space for being able to come up with a skillful response
- **Deep Breaths** - - reactivity is the output of the sympathetic nervous system; because our bodies are not designed to be in sustained states of elevated stress, there is the parasympathetic nervous system to calm us down; taking deep breaths invokes the parasympathetic nervous system; again giving us a bit more space
- **Purposeful Pause** - - taking about 30-60 seconds to check in with yourself by inquiring 'what thoughts are present right now? what emotions are present right now? what bodily sensations are present right now?' In each case merely noting, observing what is present without commentary or judgment; this practice grounds us in the present moment and helps us realize that thoughts, emotions and sensations are impermanent, they come and go

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Cultivating Personal Resilience

Philip H Davidson, PhD Mindfulness Teacher

Additional in the moment Mindfulness Practices: (continued)

- **Investigation** - - after applying one or more of the above practices and gaining a bit of space
 - we might want to notice and name emotions like Denial, Resistance, Wishing Things Other Than They Are; these three emotions can undermine our ability to come up with a skillful response; they are very normal human reactions and often protect us; they have limited value, however; when they distract and compromise our creative thoughts about what can happen next, these three emotions are not helpful; naming them, allowing them to be present (because they are) then letting them go allows the PFC to come back on line
 - We can inquire of ourselves ‘what professionally skillful and simple action is called for right now?’ This practice helps us stay focused in the present moment, another behavior that brings the PFC back on line
 - We can also inquire of ourselves ‘what do I need right now that I can offer myself?’ This is another way of staying connected with kindness.

RESOURCES

Books

- “10% Happier,” Dan Harris
- “Finding the Space To Lead,” Janice Marturano
- “Radical Compassion,” Tara Brach
- “The Here-and-Now Habit: How Mindfulness Can Help You Break Unhealthy Habits Once and for All,” Hugh Byrne, Ph.D.
- “Bouncing Back, Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well Being,” Linda Graham

People and Organizations

- Tara Brach; nationally recognized Mindfulness and Meditation teacher and author: tarabrach.com
- Kristin Neff; leading expert on Self Compassion; self compassion.org
- Jon Kabat-Zinn; multiple videos on YouTube
- The Innerwork Center in Richmond, VA; www.innerworkcenter.org
- Institute for Mindful Leadership: <http://instituteformindfulleadership.org>
- Mindful Magazine: mindful.org

Electronic Apps

Insight Timer
Mindfulness Daily
Headspace
Mindful Leadership Meditations

Research

The following contains a summary of the research on the effectiveness and benefits of meditating and practicing mindfulness

“Are We Morally Obligated to Meditate?”

<https://huntsvilletribune.com/are-we-morally-obligated-to-meditate/>

Closing Poem - 1/19/2022 Mindfulness / Resilience Session

Revelation - - Faults

Revelation isn't shy.
It doesn't come right out
And say "Here I am,"
But neither does it hide.
Revelation dependably arrives
Whenever I create a bit of
Inner space. Between two
Fearful thought loops,
It appears - - a sense of
Openness or grace,
The taste of divinity
And faith. Revelation
Isn't predictable, exactly,
But when I am present,
Revelation is always
Near at hand, shining
Light upon my shadowed
Places, allowing me to
See what once was hidden.
Praise be for the revelatory
Awakening that happens
Day by day, the filling of
My inner well, with
Knowing, awe, and love.