



Stillness ACTIVISM

Week 3: Befriending the Nervous System

Welcome to Week 3 of Stillness Activism. The past two weeks, we have created a foundation for engaging in mindfulness practice, working with the polarities and fluidity of being and doing, as well as stillness and movement. This week, we turn our attention to the neurobiology of mindfulness and how we can work with the nervous system in healthy and supportive ways.

A Poem to begin

Oceans by *Juan Ramon Jimenez*

I have a feeling that my boat
Has struck, down there in the depths,
 Against a great thing.
 And nothing happens!
Nothing. Silence. Waves.
 --Nothing happens?
Or has everything Happened,
And are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?



Understanding the Nervous System

The nervous system is a wild expression of evolution, designed to govern our wellbeing, and to keep us safe from harm. Yet, often our nervous systems create experiences of anxiety, fear, overwhelm, distraction and so much more. Mindfulness offers us a way to retrain and to work with the nervous system, with our triggers and our habitual patterns to find greater ease and equanimity over time.

At the core, the nervous system (the brain, spinal cord, sensory organs, and all of the nerves that connect these organs with the rest of the body) is responsible for the control of the body and communication among its parts.

In ages past, our nervous system functioned to keep us safe and alive. Stress hormones would enter the bloodstream when we were threatened and allowed us to act quickly and think on our feet. Nowadays, there are few instances when our lives are actually threatened and we need to either fight or flee a situation, but the same responses remain in our nervous system from a whole host of perceived threats – everything from completing a work deadline, competing in a race, missing a bus or being late for a meeting. Other threats such as climate change, racism, and the current global pandemic can create the same fight, flight or freeze responses as well.

Not all stress is bad. Positive stress is what allows us to work late to complete a deadline for a funding proposal or complete a work deadline or push our physical limits. However, much of our stress is negative and accumulates over time. The momentary stress of getting kids to school on time or forgetting a meeting is combined with the ongoing stress of managing work deadlines and an ongoing need for productivity. The social isolation of our current moment has added so many stressors to people's day to day lives, whether the loss of work, managing children while trying to work full-time, isolation over weeks and months, or the fear of getting sick. Over time, the combined stressors can lead to chronic stress in the nervous system where the body is always in a constant state of threat.

It's important to understand the two basic parts of the nervous system, the *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic* nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is the fight or flight response that prepares our body to react to stress. When the sympathetic nervous system is heightened, the stress hormones of cortisol, adrenaline and norepinephrine are released. This in turn increases our heart rate, slows digestions and increases blood pressure so we can think or act more quickly in response to a stressful experience.

The parasympathetic nervous system helps us recover from the stress we experience. However, when we are chronically stressed, the body never has the chance to rest, recover and integrate. Chronic stress can leave the body at risk because the stress hormones suppress non-emergency functions, such as maintaining the immune system. This is where mindfulness comes in.



Jon Kabat Zinn, one of the pioneers in bringing mindfulness into modern medicine and healthcare defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”. In mindfulness practice, we focus the mind in specific ways to develop a more rigorous form or present moment awareness that can directly alleviate suffering in one’s life, and in this case can directly work to regulate and calm the nervous system.

Studies have shown that the practice of mindfulness improves the capacity to regulate emotion, to combat emotional dysfunction, to improve patterns of thinking and to reduce negative mindsets. Mindfulness has also been shown to enhance the functioning of the body, including healing, immune response, stress reactivity and a general sense of physical wellbeing. When we focus our attention in particular ways, we activate different parts of the brain’s circuitry that can strengthen and support the linkages in those areas of the brain. This means that experience can create structural changes in the brain. Our brains are not static. In fact, research has shown that the brain has incredible neuroplasticity - the ability of the brain to form and reorganize synaptic connections.

Mindfulness can allow the opportunity to develop nonreactivity and create a pause before externally responding while allowing time for coordination and balance to the neural circuits involved in the reactive area of the brain. Mindfulness practice activates the coordinating and balancing functions of our prefrontal cortex which builds and strengthens the capacity for nonreactivity over time. Note that where people have experienced significant trauma, mindfulness is often not sufficient alone to shift trauma responses.

This doesn’t mean that mindfulness practice gets rid of negative emotions. Rather it reduces the duration of the negative emotions once it arises – they simply don’t persist in the same way. Mindfulness can provide tools to work with the sympathetic nervous system when it gets activated, and can bring online more quickly the parasympathetic nervous system which can bring us back to homeostasis.

Ultimately, mindfulness can become a way to be more gentle with yourself, to work with what is arising with compassion and care for yourself, trusting that the nervous system will continue to do what it is designed to do. When we can listen with more openness to the stress, anxiety, fear and overwhelm that is actually present, we may start to respond in different ways to our own wellbeing.*

“Don’t meditate to fix yourself, to heal yourself, to improve yourself, to redeem yourself; rather, do it as an act of love, of deep warm friendship to yourself. In this way there is no longer any need for the subtle aggression of self-improvement, for the endless guilt of not doing enough. It offers the possibility of an end to the ceaseless round of trying so hard that wraps so many

* Note: much of the information in this section is adapted from Daniel Siegal’s book, *The Mindful Brain*. His research on mindfulness and the brain is a great resource if you are interested in diving in further.



people's lives in a knot. Instead there is now meditation as an act of love. How endlessly delightful and encouraging.” - Bob Sharples, from Meditation: Calming the Mind

Mindfulness practice for the nervous system

The nervous system is a source of tremendous information and insight. When we can befriend the intensity that we sometimes feel, we can begin to use that insight and information in useful ways. And we are able to let go and step back from the information that holds us back or perpetuates negative feelings.

One powerful way to work with the nervous system is to focus on the breath and use it as a tool to regulate the nervous system and bring it into balance. This can be practiced as a separate meditation. It can also be practiced when big feelings, emotions or thoughts arise in any moment - in a meeting, in a conflict with your partner, in response to injustices you observe. You can practice these steps in any moment as a way of regulating and calming the nervous system, and using the breath to bring more integration of the body and mind.

- 1. Take your seat.** Sit quietly in an upright posture with your palms face down resting on your thighs. Sit with a sense of dignity, strength and ease. If you are not sitting, just stand and be present.
- 2. Place your attention on the present moment.** Without judgment or evaluation or choosing one thing over another, simply observe what is arising in each moment. Become a container for your experience and watch the sensations, feelings and thoughts arise and change from one moment to the next. Hold the vast field of awareness in your attention like the wide angle lens of a camera.
- 3. Notice the experience in the nervous system.** Bring your attention to the physical sensations in your body. Notice the texture and tone of your physical sensations. Notice the different places in the body where the sensations arise – is there a rushing sensation, or tightness or shaking? Are the sensations hot or cold, ? How are the sensations changing moment to moment? You can also notice what feelings are present, and any stories or thoughts that may be running through your mind. Pay attention to how the sensations, feelings and thoughts shift and change. Also pay attention to what your preferences – are the sensations, feelings and thought comfortable or uncomfortable, pleasant or unpleasant?
- 4. Focus on the breath.** Narrow your attention to your breath like focusing the lens of a camera in a more concentrated and centred way. Focus on the nostrils, the belly, the chest, or anywhere that the breath makes itself known. Pick one of these centres to place your attention on. Keep returning your attention to the breath over and over. If you are



experiencing an intense feeling, emotion or thought, allow those feelings and thoughts to continue to be present in the background but continue to place your attention on your breath. Once you feel your body, breath, feelings, sensations and thoughts start to regulate you can move onto the final step.

5. Bring your attention to your whole body. Move out to become aware of sensations in the whole body. Scan from the feet all the way to the crown of the head and then expand your attention to the whole body, the whole breath, moving back to wider and spacious container of attention for our experience.

Journalling prompts

After exploring some of the resources for this week, including this week's audio recording, take some time to reflect on the following journal prompts:

1. What are the situations, experiences or relationships that trigger a stress response for you?
2. What does it feel like when your nervous system gets overwhelmed or heightened? What does it feel like to experience chronic stress?
3. When and where do you experience safety, ease, calm and relaxation? What does it feel like in your body?
4. Where is one stressful place or situation or relationship in which you want to practice mindfulness?

Resources

[Daniel Siegal talk on Mindfulness](#)

[It's not all in your mind: how meditation affects the brain to help you stress less](#) by Michaela Pascoe

Books for diving in deeper:

[The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and body in the Healing of Trauma](#) by Bessel Van Der Kolk



[My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trama and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies](#) by Resmaa Menakem

[Mindsight: the New Science of Personal Transformation](#) by Daniel Siegal

A Poem to end

I Said To The Wanting-Creature Inside Me

By Kabir

I said to the wanting-creature inside me:
What is this river you want to cross?
There are no travelers on the river-road, and no road.
Do you see anyone moving about on that bank, or
nesting?

There is no river at all, and no boat, and no boatman.
There is no tow rope either, and no one to pull it.
There is no ground, no sky, no time, no bank, no ford!

And there is no body, and no mind!
Do you believe there is some place that will make the
soul less thirsty?
In that great absence you will find nothing.

Be strong then, and enter into your own body;
there you have a solid place for your feet.
Think about it carefully!
Don't go off somewhere else!

Kabir says this: just throw away all thoughts of
imaginary things,
and stand firm in that which you are.



