

## Thinking About Thinking

**Objective:** Mindfulness practice enables us to be aware of our own thought patterns without being swept away by them. Being able to recognize what kinds of thoughts we habitually have can provide insights and greater freedom from identifying with them. We are not our thoughts – they can just pass by like sounds, clouds or other phenomena.

### Preparation.

- Offer a brief review of basic mindfulness practice (if needed).
- Perhaps offer a stretch or mindful movement to transition to practice.
- Discussions and exercises will alternate.
- You'll need a timer and a bell or chime.

### Facts

- The goal of mindfulness is NOT to have no thoughts – that's impossible.
- The average person has between 50,000 to 60,000 thoughts a day, that's a thought every 1.5 seconds
- 90% of our thoughts are repetitive.

### Part 1 Exercise (2 minutes)

- *Explain that today will begin with a two-minute practice first, then a brief discussion and end with another short, then longer practice and a wrap-up discussion.*
- For one minute, we will use our breath as an anchor for our attention. Find your "mindful posture" and settle in as the bell rings to start. (*Ring bell*) First, take three deep breaths. (*Pause*) See where you feel your breath today (nostrils, throat, lungs or belly.)
- (*Pause*) Notice anything else that's going on inside or outside of you. Breathe normally and follow your breath in silence until you hear the bell ring signaling the end of the exercise. (*Wait until the end of two minutes, then ring bell*)

### Discussion / Check in: (15 minutes)

- *Ask the group:* Did anyone have trouble just focusing on their breath? Raise your hands if yes. Can someone share what was taking their attention away from their breath? (*Answers may be past or future thinking or planning*) Yes, the mind is almost always busy, isn't it? Anyone able to completely follow their breath and not get distracted for the whole time? Right, it's pretty rare! (*Share the facts section, above.*)
- Do you ever find that your thoughts get in the way? Like when you want to go to sleep? Or when you want to think about different things, but the same thoughts keep coming back? Or do you ever feel like you're being hijacked by your thoughts? (*Give personal examples here if appropriate*)

### **Discussion / Check in: (continued)**

- Have you ever looked around at a movie theater at people watching the film? They're totally absorbed, like they're IN the movie! Have you ever felt like that? Sometimes our thoughts can play like a movie and we get caught up in them. A lot of time can pass before we snap out of it. Has that ever happened to you? Please feel free to share and discuss. *(Give personal examples here if appropriate)*
- Have you ever heard the expression, "train of thought?" Sometimes we can find ourselves on that train and we've already gone 4-5 stops before we even realize that we've gotten on the train! Has that happened to you? Yes, it's like daydreaming, which can be very pleasant, but are there times when it might not be such a good idea to be completely lost in thought? *Let students answer - engage in discussion about being "asleep at the wheel" or on "autopilot." May not be safe or what they choose at times. Have they experienced negative affects, or have you?*
- Ok, let's try mindfulness again, only this time if you notice that you're getting caught up in your thinking, you don't need to get mad at yourself. Instead, each time you notice that you're having a thought simply raise your hand.

### **Part 2 Exercise (1 minute)**

- *Repeat prompts and suggestions from previous mindfulness practices to start. Ring bell.*
- Settling into your mindful posture, finding your anchor in the breath or body, allow yourself to relax. We're just going to sit for one minute.
- Now whenever you notice that you're having a thought, simply raise your hand. You can lower your hand again once the thought has passed. Just keep raising and lowering your hand whatever kinds of thoughts you're having. *(Ring bell at end, kids open eyes)*
- Check in: Raise your hand if you noticed thoughts coming and going? A lot, or just a few? Did anyone notice what kinds of thoughts they were having? Care to share?

### **Part 3 Exercise (4 minutes)**

- We're going to use our breath again as an anchor for our attention for four minutes. Take a deep breath. (Pause) See if you can notice just your breath for a little while.
- Whenever you notice that you're having a thought, just say silently to yourself, "Oh, I'm thinking." If you feel lost in your thoughts, you're actually not lost because you just found your awareness! You're not doing it wrong - you're doing it right. You can say silently to yourself, "thinking, thinking" every time you notice yourself thinking, and then come back to your breath. (Pause) If you get caught up in thinking again, it's OK. You can always return to your breath or body - that's why we call it an anchor.
- Once you've got that down, you can try noticing the kinds of thoughts you're having: are there words or pictures or both? Are the thoughts about you or someone else? In the future or the past? You might even get more specific, noting to yourself, "planning," or "rehearsing." Every time you notice that you're thinking, you're succeeding at being mindful! You then have another opportunity to come back to the present moment with your attention. That's the gift (and that's why it's called "the present"!). *(Bell rings at end of four minutes)*

**Wrap-up Discussion: (5 minutes)**

1. *Ask the group:* How was that for you? Was there still a lot of thinking? That's OK! It happens to all of us, even those of us who have been doing mindfulness a long time. Did anyone notice that they had mostly a certain kind of thinking going on? Thoughts in the past? The future? About yourselves? Others? This is all just information for you to learn about yourselves. The more we know ourselves the better,, right? *Maybe share what kinds of thoughts you mostly have: planning, or remembering ...*
2. Just like we applied the analogy of weather to our emotions, we can also do that with our thinking. Thoughts can pass like clouds in the clear blue sky of our awareness...
3. A neuroscientist once wrote, "The brain is designed to secrete thoughts the way the mouth secretes saliva." I find this quote helpful because it reminds me that thinking is a natural human process. I don't have to try to stop it. But I also don't have to believe every thought that pops into my head. Did you notice any random thoughts or thoughts that seemed kinda crazy? Yes, we all have them! What do you all think: is every thought true or real? *Take time to discuss...*