



Finding Balance

9. Thoughts and Feelings

Most humans have trouble with thoughts and feelings, because we're too close to them. They're happening in our own heads, in our own bodies, and it's hard to get perspective on them.

If you're trying to untie a knot, you're not going to put your face right there over the knot. You'd have to cross your eyes just to see it, and pull it apart with your teeth. You're more likely to get a little distance, so you can see what's really going on and use your hands to untie it.

But with thoughts and feelings that trouble us, we often try to deal with them by analyzing them, obsessing about them, thinking about them non-stop, and taking them very seriously. Or we might run the other way—ignoring, avoiding, and denying them until they blow up in our faces. But very few of us have been trained to keep our thoughts and feelings at just the right distance.

If your stress system has been affected by a loved one's deployment or post-deployment stress effects, there are often a few extra layers of complication. Your thoughts (and his or her thoughts) can be jumbled, scattered, and confused. Even positive feelings can trigger stress reactions. It can actually seem like your feelings are threats to your survival and your thoughts are the only weapons you have to defend yourself. Here are some questions to ask yourself when you run into this turbulence:

1. What's going on in my head right now?
2. Is the way I'm thinking or feeling right now really going to help me survive, succeed, be happy, or fulfill my mission or purpose in life?
3. What's the next right thing I can do right now, and what can I do to focus on that next right thing instead of all this stuff that's going on in my head?
4. Who can I talk to who would understand and help me get back on track?

Several resilience skills involve using your mind to manage your thoughts and feelings and bring your stress system back in balance. You can:

- **Practice being in the “here-and-now”:** This skill can be challenging at first, especially if you’re grieving the past or worried about the future. One way is to notice things in the present—your breathing, sensations in your body, people and things around you, etc. (One quick exercise is “Grounding,” Page iii.)

How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Practice physical and mental overwatch:** Most people are so lost in our own experience—our thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and opinions—that we almost think we **are** those thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions. It’s important to practice providing overwatch of your own minute-to-minute experience. Don’t try to avoid having the experience, but while you’re having it, also watch it and notice things about it. (More on overwatch in Section 4)

How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Identify and manage triggers:** When your stress system is out of balance, even ordinary things—and well meaning people—can trigger intense stress reactions, from intense memories to intense pain, anger, fear, or guilt. It’s important to learn what kinds of things trigger your stress reactions, so you can make a plan for coping with them. (More on triggers in Section 6)

How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Question things:** The more often we think a thought, the more it gets “burned” into the brain. Many people get used to thinking negative thoughts over and over, and it gets harder and harder to keep these thoughts from triggering stress chemicals. Some of our most upsetting thoughts aren’t true, or haven’t happened. One way to keep thoughts from running you over is to question them: “How do I know this is true?” “Is this something I **really** believe in the present? Was it just true in the past? Is it something that might not even happen?”

How could this skill be useful to you? _____

Tool: Being Mindful—Noticing Without Judging

As you learn and practice overwatch on your experiences, thoughts, and feelings, it's helpful to take advantage of an old and well practiced technique for doing this. The idea of being mindful has been around more than 2,500 years, originally as a Buddhist meditation practice called Mindfulness. But lately many Western teachers, doctors, counselors, and people of all occupations have also been using it, to calm down and learn to think more effectively.⁶ It's a good skill to combine with the other skills described in this workbook.

You don't have to be a Buddhist or “into meditation” to practice being mindful. You don't have to sit still, cross your legs, or breathe a certain way. It helps if you breathe slowly and deeply, but you don't have to. And you can be mindful anywhere—at work, driving, walking, waiting for appointments, watching TV, with friends or family, etc. You can practice being mindful no matter what else you're doing. Nobody will even know you're doing it.

Being mindful is about getting a little relief from that constant “mind chatter”—that jumble of thoughts, feelings, and memories that most people have bouncing around in our heads. It's not about controlling the mind chatter or shutting it down. It's about getting a little distance from it. People who practice being mindful understand that you can't make the mind chatter go away. But what you can do is focus your attention on what's happening right now—where you are, what's happening around you, how your body feels, etc. (the kinds of things you noticed in the Grounding exercise). That way, instead of focusing on the mind chatter, you can just be aware of it—watch it as it goes by. **And practice watching it without judging yourself or others.**

That's why mindfulness can be a good technique for practicing overwatch. You're watching your experience from a little higher ground, a little more distance, a little better perspective. Thoughts may be happening inside your head, but your thoughts are not who you are. And because you're not so caught up in your thoughts, your feelings don't get so intense either.

You might think of your thoughts, feelings, urges, and memories as clouds floating over your head, or cars rolling past you on the highway below. You notice them, but they don't have to move you around or make you lose your balance. You're still in the same place, watching them. Your thoughts, feelings, urges, and memories are like those clouds or cars. They're moving past you, but you're still grounded in the here-and-now.

You can also train yourself to remember to be more mindful in everyday life. You can decide that certain things are going to remind you to be more mindful—like red lights in traffic, sidewalks, fences, etc. After a while, your mind really can get quieter. You can get calmer and start thinking more clearly. Mindfulness actually helps “grow” the higher parts of your brain that help balance and strengthen your stress system.

⁶ There are many books, etc. on Mindfulness. One good place to start is with a well known American author and expert on the subject, Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Tool: Remembering Success

Inspired by a suggestion from Desert Storm Veteran Steve Robinson

This skill isn't just about the way the world defines "success"—achievements that others might think are important. This is also about remembering things like:

- **Peak experiences:** These may be times when you've felt happy, free, triumphant, successful, inspired, creative, alive, connected, "in the zone"—any or all of these things. These experiences are important, because they help you explore and believe in the best in you.
- **Times when you've overcome adversity:** These experiences show how strong you are, show you how to handle stress, and remind you that you can handle stress successfully. They can increase your sense of hope and confidence.
- **Times when your mind has been opened:** Sometimes your greatest triumphs might include conquering the way you've always thought about someone or something. When you end up liking, admiring, or respecting a person, an idea, or an experience that you judged negatively in the past, your world gets a little bigger and a little more comfortable, with more possibilities.

Make a list of 7 experiences of success below, then picture each one and hold it in your mind:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____
