



What? Me Worry!?!

Module 4

Attention Training

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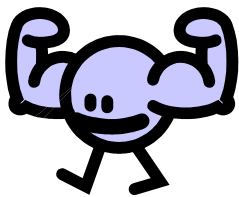
Introduction

When we worry it is like we are living our life in the future, as our mind is caught up in all sorts of catastrophic scenarios of what might happen in life to come. Our body is in the present moment, but our mind is very much elsewhere. Often we may not even be aware that our mind is doing this. Worriers will often say that because of this, they miss out on what is happening in life here and now.

If once you started worrying, you could be aware this was happening and bring your attention back to the present task at hand, would your worrying actually be a problem? Chances are you would feel a lot better if you could do this. In this module we will work on retraining your attention, so you are more aware of where your attention goes, and can be more flexible with redirecting your attention to the present moment. Attention training exercises will also help you with worry postponement, which we covered in the last module. Postponement relies heavily on the two skills of being aware our attention is caught up in worrying, and then after postponing that worry, redirecting our attention to the present task at hand.

Exercising Your Attention

Unfortunately, our worrisome thoughts are often about things that are important to us, so they sometimes grab our attention and can be hard to let go of. However, trying to answer back, chase, or suppress these negative thoughts can sometimes *strengthen* this negative experience rather than diminish it.



So how do we get our attention back on the present? Well, think of your attention like a muscle... if you don't exercise it regularly, it will become weak and won't work as well. We need to strengthen it by giving it regular exercise!!

There are two ways you can give your attention a regular workout, **mundane task focusing** and **meditation**, both of which are mindfulness-based attention training exercises. Mindfulness involves paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, and doing so with an accepting attitude towards whatever you notice. In this way you become the watcher or observer of whatever you are experiencing (i.e., your breath, body sensations, thoughts, feelings, sensory experiences, etc). Mindfulness involves practicing how to notice when your attention has wandered away from the present, and then skilfully redirecting your attention back to the here and now.

It is not an attempt to control your thoughts or to make them go away. It is actually about allowing these thoughts to be present in your mind, and at the same time choosing to shift your attention back on to something in the present moment.

Mundane Task Focusing

You may have noticed that when you are doing everyday household jobs like the dishes or the ironing, your mind is not really on the task at hand, but likely on autopilot. These are often times that our mind starts to wander. Therefore, these types of tasks are great opportunities to practice strengthening our attention 'muscle'.

With mundane task focussing, the goal is to gradually practice sustaining your attention on a mundane activity, thus giving your attention a good workout.

The good thing about mundane task focusing, is that you are not having to do anything extra in your day, it is just about changing how you pay attention to things you are already doing.

Take a moment to think about the various everyday routine tasks you do, that you could use as an opportunity to exercise your attention (e.g., doing the dishes, hanging washing, gardening, taking a shower, vacuuming, eating a meal, brushing teeth, walking, etc). Write these below so that you can refer back to them when planning your attention workout.

Pick one of these tasks for your first attention workout, and record the task and when and where you will do it on the *My Attention Workout Worksheet*. Now, start the task without intentionally trying to work your attention. You may wish to gauge your 'pre-workout' attention levels by rating the percentage of your attention that is currently focussed on your self (including on your own thoughts, bothersome symptoms and sensations, feelings, etc) versus the percentage currently focussed on the task at hand.

Now, whilst continuing the task, you can officially start your attention workout. Each time you notice your mind has wandered off the task, anchor your attention back to the task by focussing, non-judgementally, on the following:

- **Touch:** What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact with the task?
- **Sight:** What do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?
- **Hearing:** What sounds do you notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?
- **Smell:** What smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?
- **Taste:** What flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?

You don't actually have to write down the answers to these questions. Simply use them to help you become aware of all the sensory aspects of the task (i.e., touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste) that you could focus on during your attention workout. These sensory aspects can then be used to anchor your attention back to the task at hand. Once you have completed the mundane task focussing activity, you may wish to re-rate how much of your attention was self versus task focussed, and think about what you have learned from completing the activity.

My Attention Workout

Mundane task: _____
 Where and when will I do my workout: _____

Before starting the attention workout, where do I notice my attention is focussed?

- Self-focussed attention (i.e., focussing on thoughts, feelings, symptoms, etc): _____ %
- Task-focussed attention (i.e., the task I was actually engaged with): _____ %

100 %

During the attention workout, anchor my attention back to the task at hand by focussing on:

- Touch: What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on my body do I have contact with the task? Are there areas of my body with more or less contact with the task?
- Sight: What do I notice about the task? What catches my eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?
- Hearing: What sounds do I notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?
- Smell: What smells do I notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?
- Taste: What flavours do I notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?

Remember that it is normal for my mind to wander off. Rather than beating myself up over this, use each time my mind wanders as an opportunity to workout my attention muscle again.

Having completed the attention workout, where did I notice my attention was focussed during the workout?

- Self-focussed attention (i.e., focussing on thoughts, feelings, symptoms, etc): _____ %
- Task-focussed attention (i.e., the task I was actually engaged with): _____ %

100 %

What did I learn from this? What conclusions can I make from this?

The aim is to complete this worksheet the first time you try mundane task focusing so you have a bit of guidance about what to do with your attention. You don't need to complete it every time you do a mundane task focusing exercise.



Meditation

Using a meditation exercise is another way that you can obtain regular practice at being present focussed, dealing with a wandering mind, and disengaging from your worrying. You can practice being mindful of your breathing, noticing any time your mind wanders away from the breath, catching its wandering, and redirecting it back to the breath as your anchor to the present moment.

It is important to remember that this is not a quick fix, it is not easy, and requires regular practice. By practicing daily you may eventually become better at disengaging from your worries.



Meditation Steps

- 1) To begin the practice, sit down in a chair and adopt a relaxed and alert posture, then ask yourself, *what am I experiencing right now?* What thoughts are around, what feelings are around, and what body sensations? Allow yourself to just acknowledge, observe and describe these experiences to yourself, without judgment and without trying to change them or make them go away. Spend 30 seconds to 1 minute just doing this.
- 2) Now bring *your focus of awareness to your breath*, focusing on the sensations of your breath as it moves back and forth in your belly. Binding your awareness to the back and forth movements of the sensations in your belly from moment to moment, and letting all thoughts go. Maybe say to yourself 'relax' or 'let go' on each outward breath. If your mind wanders away to other thoughts, feelings and sensations – again do not try to change them or make them go away. Simply acknowledge their presence, allowing them to be there, then letting go with your attention and focusing back on your breath. Spend about 1 or 2 minutes doing this.
- 3) Now *expand your awareness to sensing your whole body breathing*, being aware of sensations throughout your body. If there are any strong feelings around, maybe saying to yourself “whatever it is, it is OK, just let me feel it.” Allowing yourself to breathe with these feelings, and if your mind wanders to bothersome thoughts or sensations, just acknowledge and let go of these - focusing back on sensing your whole body breathing. Continue doing this for about another 1 or 2 minutes.

As you start to get more familiar with this skill you can try increasing the time of steps 2 & 3. We would recommend that you keep increasing this until you are able to practice twice per day for ten minutes or more, and then try to keep practicing daily at this level.

Remember, your attention is like a muscle; if you stop the regular exercise your muscle won't work quite so well. You can use the Attention Training Diary to keep track of your progress with both meditation and mundane task focusing.

We recommend that you practice mundane task focussing and meditation at least once daily each. If you find it difficult to fit the regular meditation exercises in, you could instead increase the number of mundane task focussing workouts you do per day. Remember, mundane task focussing isn't asking you to do anything extra, only to use those activities you are already doing in a particular way.

Attention Training Diary

You can use this sheet to both plan your attention training and to record your progress along the way. The last column asks you to jot down any comments about the experience – What did you notice? Did you notice when your mind wandered off? Were you able to re-direct your attention? How did it compare to other times you have practiced?

Date & Time	Attention Task	Duration	Comments
<i>e.g., Monday 5th, 9:00am</i>	<i>Meditation</i>	<i>2 mins</i>	<i>My mind kept drifting to worries about the kids, but I just kept refocusing on my breath</i>
<i>Monday 5th, 6.00pm</i>	<i>Mundane task focussing (while doing the dishes)</i>	<i>10 mins</i>	<i>I noticed lots of things I didn't usually notice. It was probably a little easier than the meditation as I had something to focus on.</i>

At this stage consider mundane task focusing and meditation as regular attention training exercises, that need to be done separate to episodes of worrying. Over time doing these exercises will:

- increase your awareness of where your attention is at any moment, so you can recognise when it is getting locked on negative thinking;
- help you be able to flexibly re-direct your attention to where you would like it to be in the present moment; and
- help you to notice when your attention inevitably wanders away from the present, and be able to bring your attention back again.

REMEMBER. It is very important to remember that the goal of mundane task focusing and meditation is not to have perfect sustained attention in the present moment 100% of the time, or to have a blank mind or no thoughts. That is impossible! And if that is your aim then you are actually suppressing your worries, and we already know how unhelpful that is.

When you try to maintain your attention on the present moment **you will notice that your mind will wander**. You might start to think about the future, the past, or something else that captures your attention. **This is ok. This is what minds do. The task is to notice when your mind wanders and gently escort it back to the ‘task at hand’** (i.e., whatever it is that you were focusing on).

When you notice that your mind has wandered during these attention training exercises, be careful not to criticise yourself for this. After all, it is completely normal. Instead, think about each and every “wander” as another opportunity to practice your skills of bringing your attention back to the here and now. Think of it this way, the skill you are learning is not to have perfectly sustained attention, but instead to **catch** your attention when it wanders and **bring it back**. As such, it really doesn’t matter how many times your attention wanders, as that is an important part of the training.

Module Summary

- Worrying is often about being focused on the future rather than the present moment. We may not even be aware that we are doing this, and can miss out on life going on around us now.
- One way of dealing with this is to retrain our attention to be more focused on the present moment.
- We can exercise or train our attention in 2 ways:
 - Mundane Task Focusing
 - Meditation
- Both exercises help us to:
 - be more aware of when our attention gets locked on worrying,
 - redirect our attention to the present task at hand,
 - catch when our mind inevitably wanders off again, and
 - bring our attention back to the present again.
- Training your attention requires regular daily practice. Be patient with yourself.
- If you notice you are getting frustrated during the exercises, it could be a sign that you are trying to use these exercises to get rid of your worries (i.e., suppress them), rather than allowing the thoughts to be there, but choosing not to engage with them.
- Training your attention will help you with worry postponement.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn how to change another of your negative beliefs about worrying – that “Worrying is dangerous”.

About The Modules

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Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

Saulsman, L., Anderson, R., Campbell, B., & Swan, A. (2015). *Working with Worry and Rumination: A Metacognitive Group Treatment Programme for Repetitive Negative Thinking*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Metacognitive Therapy (MCT). MCT is a type of psychotherapy developed by Professor Adrian Wells at the University of Manchester. MCT is an extension of Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and is based on the theory that repetitive negative thinking, such as chronic worry in generalised anxiety, is a result of problematic metacognitions (i.e., beliefs about thinking) and behaviours. There is good scientific evidence to support that targeting metacognitions and behaviours in therapy can help many people to overcome generalised anxiety. Examples of this evidence are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Anderson, R. A., Campbell, B. N. C., Swan, A., Saulsman, L. M., Summers, M., & Nathan, P. R. (2015). Group metacognitive therapy for repetitive negative thinking in primary and non-primary generalized anxiety disorder: an effectiveness trial. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 175, 124-132.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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Wells, A. (2008). *Metacognitive Therapy for Anxiety and Depression*. New York: Guilford Press.

“WHAT? ME WORRY!?!”

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