

Thinking with the Heart

The origin of Soften, Soothe, Allow

by Christopher Germer



My path to understanding the importance of lovingkindness in mindfulness-based psychotherapy wasn't always smooth. Madeline was one of my first client-teachers.

She was an 82-year-old woman who, even though in good health and of sound mind, despaired that she'd have to leave her beloved home of 45 years, because she lived on a portion of a suburban street where neighborhood children congregated to play . . . and scream. The noise kept her from sleeping, and she was experiencing chronic stomach and neck tension. She'd tried what she could to reduce the noise level—talking to the children's parents, playing soothing music to shut out the sounds. In spite of such steps, however, she lived in fearful anticipation of the next child's shriek. Madeline felt sad about her noise sensitivity because she wanted to enjoy the ebullience of her neighborhood kids, just as she'd enjoyed her own children's energy earlier in her life.

Initially I thought Madeline might benefit from listening in a more spacious way to the sounds around her—not focusing all the time on the children's screaming. I made Madeline an audiotope, "Mindfulness of Sound," that taught her to passively notice all the sounds in her environment. It didn't work. She said she just found the noise of the children too disturbing.

Next I thought she might benefit from internal exposure. If she could mindfully explore her physical and emotional reactions to the noise, perhaps she'd be able to relax. And if her body felt better, I hoped, maybe she'd obsess less about the noise. Ever cooperative, Madeline explored her sensations, thoughts, and emotions whenever she noticed she was anxious: "Where does it hurt?" "What does it feel like?" "Does the pain come and go?" "What thoughts and feelings come along with the stress of those noisy kids?" I instructed her to simply notice what she was feeling in her body and how her body reacted to the external sounds. This

exercise didn't help either, not the least little bit. All it did was focus Madeline on just how bad she felt, and made her even more upset with herself and her situation.

The closer Madeline got to her distress, the more overwhelmed she became. We might call this exposure without desensitization, or mind-less exposure. The trick with mindfulness techniques is to maintain attentional stability and a certain nonattachment as uncomfortable experience is allowed into awareness, but not become emotionally overwhelmed. In some cases, medication may be required as an adjunct to mindfulness-based treatment. I suggested to Madeline that she discuss taking Klonopin or Paxil with her physician. But she demurred—she rarely took medicine, on principle, and wanted to continue exploring behavioral techniques.

By now, I seriously doubted that I could help Madeline. Then I recollected that she'd volunteered for many years at a nursing home, brought Vietnamese children to the United States after the war, and was active in her church. I started to wonder whether she could bring the same quality of compassion that she had for others to herself. Would lovingkindness help her better tolerate her distress?

Together, we came up with a new meditation: "Soften, allow, and love." Madeline was enthusiastic about this one from the start, so I made another 20-minute audiotope for her to practice with.

The meditation begins with simple awareness of whatever sensations may be occurring in the body. Can you feel the pressure of your body on the couch? Can you notice the movement of your breath? After a minute, attention is shifted to an unpleasant physical sensation. For Madeline, this was either her tense stomach or her neck. The first component of the meditation, "softening," refers to relaxing that uncomfortable part of the body. However, to avoid frustration if relaxation doesn't occur, softening is an invitation to relax.

When you feel discomfort, can you soften that part of your body? You don't have to relax; just

allow that spot on your body to soften—if it's ready to.

The next component is "allowing." This refers to allowing the physical sensations of the body to be just what they are—unpleasant, neutral, or pleasant. It's an ancient Buddhist meditation technique.

Can you allow yourself to feel the discomfort as long as it lingers? Can you just let it be, as long as it's there, even if it hurts? You don't have to change it—it'll pass at its own time. Can you let it come and go as it wants to?

Finally, in the "love" component, you try to recollect a feeling of love that can be redirected at your own body. This is a variation on the lovingkindness practice. Instead of reciting phrases, we capture a feeling—a brain state, if you will—and associate it with a new object of awareness. In this case, the new object is a difficult body sensation.

Now, imagine what it was like when one of your children had a tummyache, just like you. Can you sense in your heart what you might have felt, or feel, as you sympathize with his or her struggle? Can you hold that feeling in your heart?

Now, can you give your own stomach the same love that you'd feel for your child if he or she were suffering in the same way? Can you bring some love to the very place where it hurts?

This meditation then led Madeline to fill her whole body with the same love she'd identified, and let that feeling of love gradually radiate out into the room and into her community.

After Madeline learned this meditation, she innocently inquired, "Where does the love come from?" "Where can I draw it from, if it doesn't come up on its own?" We decided that love just seems to be a quality that comes naturally to everyone. Sometimes we feel it most for a child or a pet. It seems to be inherent in all of us, just like awareness. The skill is to recollect what love feels like and to direct it where it's needed most.

Eventually we expanded Madeline's loving awareness beyond her physical pain to encompass the emotional discomfort she felt when her home became too noisy.

Two weeks after learning this exercise, Madeline reflected aloud, "I think I have to learn to love myself more!" Four weeks later, she was feeling some enthusiasm for "working" with her

noise sensitivity, and she said she felt 50 percent better. She surprised herself that she was actually beginning to feel affection for the noisy kids. She bought a lovely hat for one neighbor girl—one just like hers—when the child admired it.

Six months after Madeline learned this practice, I called her to inquire how she was feeling. She was still practicing self-compassion on a daily basis. She said, "When I hear a scream and I'm up and about, I kind of welcome it, because it's a part of my world. It gives me a chance to practice, too. I'm not saying I'm 100 percent cured, because there are times when I get annoyed, like when I'm reading the Bible and am with God. Then the noise is intrusive. But I'm generally much happier. I didn't know I could give love to myself!"

I asked her if the practice changed anything else in her life. She replied, "I have a sense of my own worth. I don't have to please people. More on top of things, you know? I don't feel victimized. I'm more accepting. If people say something wrong, I let it go. I don't have to be right. I can let it go."

I still wanted to know specifically how she was practicing lovingkindness. She said she intentionally recalled the great compassion she'd felt for her youngest son, about 44 years ago, when he'd awoken with his eyes sealed shut from discharge. Her little boy was terrified, and she was filled with love for him at that moment. "Now I direct that love at myself," she said. "Where exactly do you direct it?" I asked. "I direct it at my upper body. I don't quite know how to describe it; my heart, yeah, it's a heart thing," Madeline replied.

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