

Mindfulness – Emotional Hijacking

Maintaining control of your emotions

Emotional Hijacking occurs when something triggers our stress response and we react in an emotionally charged way or we emotionally shut down. Without even thinking, the amygdala (part of the brain that cues the emotional state of fear, sadness, and anger) sends a signal to release the hormones that prime our body to focus and act upon the real or perceived threat. This moves us quickly into a fight, flight, or freeze response. The amygdala stores past memories of pain, threat, and trauma, and often makes a faulty linkage based on incomplete information to the new trigger. The automatic response happens faster than what we can cognitively process, impacting our ability to think clearly, and act in a rational, thoughtful way.

Four Step Practice to Avoid Emotional Hijacking

Whatever the stimulus is (person, place, situation, etc.) that is pulling the emotional trigger for you, awareness, which is the second component of mindfulness, will help you remain in control of your emotions. Awareness sits in the space between the stimulus and the response. This is where we find the clarity to pause and make a conscious choice on how we will respond.

As we become more aware, we can begin to recognize the early warning signs of our emotional reaction and put into practice the following steps to stay in control or regain control of our emotions and respond in a more productive way.

1. STOP

- Stop and acknowledge the negative emotion as soon as possible.
- Decide NOT to react for this moment.

2. BREATHE

- Take a four count breath in and pause for a moment before letting it out through your mouth with a six or an eight count.
- Concentrate on the exhale to let your body and mind soften.
- Repeat until you are feeling more in control. This can take a minute or two.
- It can help to add in a silent word like “calm,” “ease,” or “chill.”

3. REFLECT

- Without judgement, get curious about where the emotion is coming from.
 - What is the emotional hook?
- Is your initial response purely about the current situation or is part of your reaction based on assumptions and/or past experience?
- What insight do you have about the current situation?
 - What is the story you are telling yourself about the situation or interaction?
 - Bring perspective into the situation – can you see the situation from another angle?
 - Do you need to get clarification from someone?
 - Is it possible that your triggered response is off base?
 - If you are perceiving the situation accurately, what is the best way to respond?
- Sometimes putting the facts, feelings, and thoughts on paper can provide clarity and further insight.

4. CHOOSE

- We cannot always control our circumstances, but we can choose our response.
 - How do you want to deal with this stress?
- Make a choice to respond and not just react.
 - What do you hope to gain by responding?
 - What is the best choice under the circumstances?
- Remember - not choosing is also making a choice.
- Consciously act on your choice.