

The Monkey Mind

Today we explore the nature of the mind and how to train the monkey mind by strengthening the prefrontal cortex, with Mark.

Opening Practice

- Find a comfortable seat and close your eyes
- Deepen your breath
- Focus your attention on the breath and nothing else for a few moments
- Gently open the eyes when you're ready

The Monkey Mind

- You may have noticed in the above exercise that it is very challenging to keep the mind focused on just ONE thing.
- The mind is much like a monkey- jumping from tree to tree, from thought to thought and simply cannot be still. It is constantly seeking movement and stimulation!
- In neuroscience, this monkey mind is called the default narrative- the narrative of one of fear, worry, restlessness and judgement.
- The monkey mind is pre-programmed and prepares us for the survival response (fight, flight and freeze) needed in dangerous situations.
- This monkey mind is hard-wired to reminisce about the past and fear the future, replaying past situations and causing anxiety and distress.

Letting Go of the Yellow Banana

Click on the link below to watch the video on "How to catch a monkey"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpJmpCJIi4E>

- Our minds are much like the monkey who gets his hand trapped in a coconut shell. If the monkey lets go of the treat or banana hidden inside it, he would be able to free his hand and escape the hunters who set the trap for him.
- If the monkey continues to hold tightly onto the treat, his hand remains stuck and he will risk his life because he isn't willing to let go of his attachment to the banana.
- Ask yourself, "What are the things or bad habits that I need to let go of that are in fact trapping me?"

Our Patterns

"I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes me a long time to get out.

The Monkey Mind

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in. It's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault. I get out immediately.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

I walk down another street.”

Portia Nelson, There's a Hole in My Sidewalk: The Romance of Self-Discovery

Training the Prefrontal Cortex

- The good news is that we can train this monkey mind and minimize the effect of the default narrative that traps us in anxiety and fear.
- By training the human part of our brain (the anterior cingulate cortex to be exact) we strengthen it so that the monkey mind has less of a hold on us and subsequently, we can foster mental health and wellbeing.
- By focusing and continuously returning the attention to just one thing, we train this monkey and strengthen the prefrontal cortex.

Mindfulness Practice: Bringing the Mind Back

- Find a comfortable seat and close your eyes gently
- Focus your awareness on just one thing. Perhaps its sound.
- Every time your mind wanders (which it will), notice and bring it back to the sounds
- For a few moments, say to yourself, “I am listening to sound”
- Try to focus all your attention on just this, despite the distractions
- Take in another deep breath and open your eyes as you exhale.

By simply noticing when the mind has wandered and then bringing it back to the focal point, continuously and consistently, we can indeed train this monkey mind. In this way we can create and sustain mental health.

This is what we call the ‘mechanics of mindfulness’.