

Navigating Shovevim Week 4

“Tools from Neuroscience”

Rabbi Avi Tenenbaum CAC, MA CASAC grad.

054 845 1458

avitenenbaum9@gmail.com

R' Zushia of Anipoli said “when I die they will not ask me why I didn't become Moshe Rabbeinu-they will ask me why I didn't become Zusha”

-R' Zusha

“in order to overcome lust, you need a lot of patience”

-The Steipler

“It is forbidden to judge yourself for having a Yetzer Harah”.

-Sefer Zimras Ha'aretz, Liku”m 72

“The pasuk in Shma says “hayom, al livavecha”-you have to serve Hashem each day focusing just on what Hashem wants you to do today, not to be distracted by the past or future”

-The Chofetz Chaim

“The main kavana of the mikva, or any mitzvah for that matter, is “I am going to the mikva”. People do mitzvos in order to get somewhere or achieve something, and they forget that the real reason to be doing this mitzvah, here and now, is simply because Hashem said to do so.”

-R' Pinchas of Koritz

Secure attachment leads to good coping

The psychotherapy and scientific world is now using a popular theory called “Attachment Theory” that was actually developed over 60 years ago by John Bowlby. The basic idea is that if we feel safe and securely attached to things or people that will help/comfort/protect us when things are difficult or scary for us, **THAT** is what helps us to become independent later on and take risks in life. We know we can take risks and do scary things **BECAUSE** we feel that we have an emotional safety-net ingrained in our subconscious mind.

According to this we can understand why some people use drugs, lust, have poor interpersonal interactions, etc.-we can say that **SINCE** they don't feel safe when confronted with scary or risky situations, they go into a fight-flight mode and cope with their fear by fighting back with their wife, numbing out the pain with lust, taking a drink when see sees a high electric bill, etc.

If we could help a person feel safe and improve healthy attachment, it can have amazing effects on lowering one's fear, anxiety, depression, impulses, etc.

Our coping styles can really be rewired and improved!

Below are *unhealthy* coping styles:

Neural Cement-This refers to a mental style where people are stuck in one/few ways of coping and have no healthy flexibility. These types of people are anxious, scared, rigid, narrow minded, & are afraid to take risks in life. They might be perfectionists so that they never have to enter a situation where they might be wrong, criticized, or uncomfortable. **They deal with fear by controlling every situation as much as they can.**

Neural Swamp-This is a mental style that is chaotic, unorganized, everywhere, unpredictable. These people don't keep to being on time, make decisions at last moment, push things off, and **deal with fear by running away and ignoring it.**

Neuroplasticity

Scientists discovered that we have the ability to rewire our brains to get out of neural cement or neural swampland, and to develop healthy & new neural networks.

This is how it works-each time we think of something/do something in response to something we experienced, we make a link between what we experienced and what we did afterwards. This creates a new neural network, a new brain connection.

So the next time we feel lust, self judgment, anger, or any other powerful feeling, we can choose to notice it and how we are feeling instead of running off to pornography or other unhealthy ways of coping. You can then become aware of your experience without being embedded inside of it. This helps us step out of being stuck in unhealthy neural patterns.

How does mindfulness help me develop healthier coping and attachment?

By becoming mindful of our pain, lust, sadness, etc. we become unstuck from our reactivity to it. Instead, we can heal ourselves and develop healthy attachment by getting in touch with ourselves better, accepting ourselves with non judgment, beginner's mind, patience for ourselves, and so on.

Notice the good things you do with mindfulness. Do things for self care and self compassion and use mindfulness to catch those moments and develop healthy attachment to yourself.

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness meditation is a type of breathing & thinking exercise that has caught worldwide attention & admiration. It is not new but over 2500 years old, originating in the eastern part of the world; however, scientists have been researching it over the last 25 years and found it to be so effective for a variety of problems that it now ranks as one of the top treatment methods for over 20 different mental and physical health problems.

Mindfulness is being universally used for treating anxiety, depression, **addiction recovery, relapse prevention**, chronic pain, marital discord, etc.

It is very simple and anyone can do it. It is not the knowing what it is that helps but the practice of doing or living with mindfulness each day with regular practice as well as when tough situations arise. It has no negative side-effects.

How to practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is more of a way of living throughout the day, but it is also practiced formally each day as well so that we can maintain our skill of living mindfully. This is just one formal way of cultivating mindfulness through practice:

- 1) sit on a chair in a comfortable position, with your hands comfortable too, maybe in your lap....
- 2) You can choose to open or close your eyes. I close them.
- 3) Start to notice each in and out breath that you have. You are NOT trying to relax, NOR are you trying to control your breathing. Instead, you are just trying to notice your in and out breaths. That is all.
- 4) As you try to notice your breaths in and out you'll become distracted by all types of things-maybe thoughts, sounds, feeling uncomfortable, maybe thinking "how long do I need to do this for?".....
All these thoughts and experiences are okay! Just simply bring your attention back to the breaths each time your mind runs away....
- 5) As you meditate, feel proud that you are taking care of yourself.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Here are just some of the benefits:

a) Regular mindfulness rewires the brain for better coping, less anxiety and fear

b) Peace of mind

c) Decrease in impulsivity and reactionary nature to stimuli

d) The skill of bringing our mind back each time it runs away and better focusing skills

e) It provides a safe place to go in your mind whenever you may feel lust, anxiety, fear, etc.

f) Overall improvement of mental and even physical health

g) Improvement of interoception=getting to know yourself really well, becoming familiar with the nature of your mind, your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and your true self

Thoughts are much less powerful and real than you think!

A huge revelation from mindfulness skills is that YOU are NOT your thoughts. Your mind's nature is to produce all types of thoughts on the subconscious level, all the time, even when you sleep. By realizing that you can objectively observe any of your thoughts and feelings, you don't have to be inside those thoughts and be dragged away by them. You can just observe them and allow a few inches to interpose between you and your thoughts.

Example-Shmulik is full of shame that he always has fleeting sexual thoughts running through his mind, without almost any conscious decision. It seems to him like he is a terrible person, a pervert. By practicing mindfulness Shmulik began to learn that his fleeting sexual thoughts came from the nature of his wild subconscious mind, and that HE, Shmulik, was able to observe those thoughts externally. He and these fleeting sexual thoughts began to appear to Shmulik as two distinct things. It made Shmulik relieved to know that HE is not his thoughts.

**Expand your free will....
if you only knew how to jump into that space....**

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space...

*...In that space lies our freedom and our power to
choose our response...*

*...In our response lies our growth and our
happiness.”*

-Victor Frankl

(Covey & Pattakos, “Prisoners of our Thoughts”, forward)

*The range of what we see and do
is limited by what we fail to notice.
and because we fail to notice
that we fail to notice,
there is little we can do
to change
until we notice
how failing to notice
shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

—R. D. Laing,

(Covey & Pattakos, “Prisoners of our Thoughts”, forward)

“Our lives are lived in intense or anxious struggle, in a swirl of speed & aggression, in competing, grasping, possessing, and achieving, forever burdening ourselves with extraneous activities & preoccupations. Meditation is the exact opposite....

....To meditate is to make a complete break with how we normally operate, for it is a state free of all cares & concerns, in which there is no competition, no desire to poses or grasp at anything, no intense & anxious struggle, and not hunger to achieve: An ambitionless state where there is neither acceptance nor rejection, neither hope nor fear, a state in which we slowly begin to release all those emotions that have imprisoned us into the space of natural simplicity.”

-Sogyal Rinpoche

Before or after your mindfulness meditation, use the 7 mindfulness traits to learn about & understand how your mind works. For example, it can be extremely enlightening to learn the wild nature of our minds is normal and that we can be accepting of it and gently try taming it.

In Buddhist contemplative tradition, they use two other words a lot that helps describe a lot of our mental activity-**“grasping”** & **“pushing”**. These words help us notice how much throughout our day and lives we are either **grasping** for things we want or **pushing** away things that we don’t want.

1 Non-Judging

By practicing mindfulness, you can become aware of how you are constantly judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences. By noticing this like an objective observer, we learn to step back from it.

Almost everything we see is labeled & categorized by the mind. People, feeling, experiences are considered either “good” or “bad”, and we don’t pay attention to the neutral at all.

This habit of categorizing and judging each moment of our lives locks us up into mechanical reactions that we are not even aware of, and that usually have no objectionable basis at all.

These judgments tend to dominate our minds, making inner peace very difficult. It’s as if our minds are a yo-yo, going up & down all day. If you doubt this, go observe for 10 minutes how much your mind is preoccupied with liking and disliking this and that and whatever is happening at that moment .**Learning the attitude of non-judging gives us inner peace and makes the lust struggle much easier, slowing down our tendency to beat our selves up all day.**

2 Patience

Patience is a form of wisdom. Patience is our way of showing we understand that sometimes things must unfold in their own time. We intentionally remind ourselves there's no need to be impatient when we find our minds judging all the time, or if we're feeling anxious or an urge to lust, or because we've taken efforts to stop lusting and nothing positive seems to have happened yet. Patience.

We give ourselves room for these experiences. Why? Because we are having them anyway-when they come up they are part of our life, part of our reality, part of our life unfolding in this moment. Why rush through these moments to get to other “better” moments? One of the main reasons we act out is because we want to “get out of this uncomfortable urge-feeling to lust” and rush to the next, “better”, moments. We keep taking short-cuts through the pain to the next place. Instead, let's cultivate a lifestyle of patience.

3 Beginner's Mind

The richness of the present moment is the richness of life itself. Too often we let our believes and projections about what we “know” prevent us from seeing things as they really are. For example, we already “know” that by having this urge to lust right now, we “will “ act out. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of this, **we want to cultivate a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time.**

We want to free our minds of expectations based on past experiences when it harms us, such as in the case of lust where, based on the past, we expect ourselves to act out because it once happened before. **An open, beginner's mind, allows us to be receptive of new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of past experiences. No moment is the same as any other. Each moment is unique with new possibilities.** The trait of beginner's mind reminds us of this simple truth.

4 Trust

This is the trait of developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings. If at any time something doesn't feel right to you, why not honor your feelings? Sometimes we trust others or authorities too much so that we no longer hear our own bodies and minds. Without knowing ourselves how can we effectively use our bodies & minds to do what we need? To know which advice may work for us best, to know what solutions might be effective for us, we need this self-awareness and healthy integration between our self-knowledge and outside advice.

It's impossible to become like somebody else-your only hope is to become more fully yourself. It's important to be receptive to learning from outside sources, but ultimately you still have to live your own life, every moment of it. By meditating and noticing your own feelings and nature, you begin to trust yourself and your own inner resources that you might not have known you even had.

5 Non-Striving

Notice how almost everything we do is with the intention that we have to get somewhere or achieve something; But in lots of life areas, such as Avodas Hashem or the battle for lust, this can be a real obstacle. How long does it take to get sober? To become a special Jew? The answer is, it's a day by day experience, not a destination that you can rush to. We get anxious, depressed, worried that we haven't yet reached this or that. By rushing ahead we cause all sorts of unnecessary problems as well as lose sight of this moment and doing a perfect job, moment by moment, day by day, here today.

Mindfulness meditation is a way to learn non-striving, because the whole goal of mindfulness is simply to notice this moment here and now. The goal is not to achieve something, get somewhere. Instead, you are already doing the goal by simply being aware of your breathing and experiences, right here, right now, today, in this body, in this lifetime. Let's orient ourselves to the present instead of always living in the future or past.

6 Acceptance

Acceptance means seeing things as they actually are in the present. In our daily lives we spend a great deal of time denying and resisting what is already fact. We try to force and wrestle things to go the way we think we need them to go, and we're disappointed again & again. This just creates more stress because we're trying to force something that will not happen any other way. This also prevents positive change from occurring because we're still busying ourselves trying to ride a dead horse. The energy we have left from all this stress is used up for more resisting and denying. Non-acceptance makes life intensely more complicated than it already has to be.

We cultivate acceptance through mindfulness because we notice anything that comes up in our thoughts & feelings and train ourselves to always see the reality of our experience. Acceptance doesn't mean you have to be passive about things and abandon your ability to make changes-**acceptance here simply means to be willing to see things as they actually are instead of pretending that it really isn't.**

7 Letting Go

This is also called non-attachment. Our mind seems to want to hold onto certain thoughts and feelings. If they are pleasant, we try prolonging them and if unpleasant, we try to run from them.

When practicing mindfulness, we observe our own mind grasping & pushing, and we remind ourselves to let go of those impulses to grasp and push; Instead, we let go and just let things come as they are.

Letting go is a way of accepting things for what they are. When we find ourselves having judgment or lust thoughts, we just let go and notice it. We let them be and in doing so we let go of them. When thoughts of the past or future come up, we just let them be and notice them. **Example**-Letting go is what we do each night when we go to sleep. When people are thinking too much while they try to go to sleep, it's a sign that they are too involved or attached to their thoughts. Forcing yourself to sleep makes it worse. We don't force things-we just let go. **By practicing mindfulness, we detach from our thoughts a little bit by letting go, and that gives us the ability to be centered in a healthier place and not be dragged along with those thoughts.**