

Exercise #6: Preventing and Managing Physical & Emotional Suffering

Many people supported will experience physical and mental suffering. Being able to teach people how to prevent, manage and minimize that suffering is one of the most meaningful and heart felt support processes for any caregiver and supporter. The following insights and process will teach you how to be an effective and compassionate reliever of your own and other's suffering.

$$\text{SUFFERING} = \text{PAIN} \times \text{RESISTANCE}$$

$$(S = P \times R)$$

The gifted contemporary teacher and scientist of the Body/Mind system Shinzen Young uses this formula to describe how pain becomes suffering (both physically and mentally) unless it is experienced mindfully. Physical pain here means the actual physiological signal sent to your brain to warn you something is wrong. You can't really change that. Resistance is how your B-FIT subconsciously reacts to that signal, how strongly negative or positive your reaction is. You can change that, and as you do, you also change your level of suffering—the actual discomfort you feel from the pain.

For example, pain at level 8 (on a 1-10 scale) and resistance at level 7 creates 56 units of suffering ($8 \times 7 = 56$).

However, the same pain (level 8) with less resistance (level 2) creates only 16 units of suffering ($8 \times 2 = 16$).

The numbers may change, but the principle is powerfully accurate. In life we often cannot remove the inevitable physical (and emotional) sources of pain, but we can learn to modify or lessen much of the resistance that we unconsciously bring to the process. Less resistance means less suffering. Take a moment to consider what this could mean for the person you are caring for, or for yourself as you face emotionally painful situations.

Divide and Conquer, Again

Remember that divide and conquer is the key principle behind the ‘miracle’ of B-FIT mindfulness. Let’s imagine now that pain and resistance are parts of that strong, braided rope we talked about in the ‘Intentions’ section. As we mindfully explore and separate each of the braided strands, the rope loses its strength. Once each strand is separated from the whole, each thread can be easily broken.

Similarly, mindfully managing pain can be seen as dividing it into more manageable parts.

To further understand this divide-and-conquer strategy, remember that the conscious and unconscious **energy that is the source of our resistance is limited**. This is proven every day by our earlier example of when the average person looks at objects—like a building on the way to work—many times, but yet never sees it. There is only so much that we can consciously focus on. Then one day, driving the same road travelled for years—there it is!

The nervous system has a limited amount of conscious energy. If we can skillfully use up this energy in mindfully exploring what is actually happening in B-FIT as we experience physical (or emotional) pain, the nervous system will not have sufficient conscious energy left to resist the pain.

For example, let’s say that when you experience a physical injury. Your nervous system which is wired in layers to protect your injured tissue, has 100 units of conscious and subconscious energy. The average untrained nervous system (the average person) without being aware of it, uses all 100 units of energy to automatically flood the body with hormones and other messages to activate the layers of tissue to resist and tighten, in order to give the brain the message to stop this harmful external activity—it hurts, it is dangerous.

Suppose however, that you use your conscious, mindful energy to explore and allowingly experience the different locations and qualities of the pain, such as:

- the location of the body sensation; for example, knee, back;
- the spatial form of the pain - the shape of the area affected;
- the intensity of the pain – stronger or weaker;
- the changing ‘flavours’ of the body sensations.

Say that you invest 20% of your units of energy into exploring and allowing each of these elements of the painful body sensations; those units of energy are now not available to build resistance to the pain and actually increase the suffering.

In B-FIT mindfulness, then, **we redeploy conscious energy 100% into studying the form and movement of the pain.** We thereby use up the energy that otherwise would have been used naturally by the nervous system to over-compensate in the production of resistance and therefore suffering. Once this process is successfully completed many times, the nervous system starts to say, “Hmm, I like this lack of suffering,” and starts to manage its resources better on its own.

Understanding Resistance

To effectively manage pain, then, we must start by understanding resistance. Not too surprisingly, all of the components of B-FIT (Body sensations, Feelings, Image thoughts and Talk thoughts) are the energy sources of resistance and therefore also potentially the source of relief from suffering.

Body Sensations:

Through hundreds of thousands of years our bodies have evolved in ways to prevent injury because not too long ago, before the age of modern medicine, a serious injury meant certain death. The nervous system therefore provides layers upon layers of protection against injury. With the mindfulness microscope of B-FIT, however, we can clearly observe and release the tension in the tissue at the centre of the pain.

Another strategy to reduce the level of suffering from the pain is to focus on what we call the “cringe” reactions surrounding the most painful location where much of the resistance is held. This is like observing the ripples on a pond after the stone makes the splash. Specifically, if awareness and an intention of allowing is brought to the following body sensations around the pain centre, the resistance - and therefore the suffering - will be significantly reduced:

Shape and size: All body sensations have a spatial form, and the form is always changing. The shape can be round, long, jagged or virtually anything. Resistance reduces when you skillfully observe the changing shape and label the changes “bigger,” “smaller,” or “same”.

Movement: As noted, the spatial form of this resisting area is always moving. It may change slowly like an amoeba or jerkily like a throbbing toothache or a pounding headache. Observe the changes in movement and label them “fast,” “slow,” “jerky,” or “same”.

Intensity: The final change is in the intensity of the pain. For a while it can be strong, then it may become quite weak. Observe the changes in intensity and label them “stronger,” “weaker” or “same”.

Just this three-fold exploration of the sensations and infusing of the sensations with allowingness can significantly lower the level of suffering.

Feelings:

The feelings or emotions that we experience act as a catalyst to increase or reduce resistance and therefore suffering. Stressful feelings like fear, anger, impatience, irritation or guilt always intensify suffering. One reason for this is that a stressful body is naturally tense and tight. This is, in part, the body’s way of signaling to the brain to stop what it is doing. To the extent that stressful feelings can be minimized, this catalyst can be managed or even eliminated. As B-FIT mindfulness softens and calms stressful feelings, it is acting to give the body a relaxing internal massage.

Image and Talk Thinking:

Similarly, thoughts can either diminish or increase the body/brain resistance mechanisms. Science has now proven that thoughts create much of our reality. “Seeing is believing, ‘cause if I hadn’t believed it I wouldn’t have seen it”.

Negative, worrying, hopeless, helpless or overwhelming image or talk thoughts clearly make resistance increase. They prepare the body for freeze, flight or fight action. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the more we can make friends with the pain, the less it will hurt us. We have 50,000 thoughts per day. To the extent that we are unaware of having a thought—it has us.

When the body is in pain, the thinking mind automatically sympathizes with the condition and becomes a co-conspirator in the push to intensify the pain: “This is awful!” “When will it ever stop?” “I can’t stand it!” Simple awareness of and intentional allowing of Image and Talk thoughts like these is a really effective way of reducing the increased suffering from pain caused by negative internal talk. As always, the best way to allow these thoughts is to label them without attachment: “Ahh, there is distress”. “There is upset”.

Resistance and B-FIT

There is a more complete version of the suffering formula:

Suffering = resistant Body Sensations x resistant feelings x resistant thoughts x PAIN.

$$10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 = 10,000 \text{ units of suffering!}$$

Even when B-FIT can be directly experienced with allowingness, the painfulness is still present. However, when resistance is diminished, it's like the formula becomes one of addition rather than multiplication.

$$10 + 10 + 10 + 10 = 40 \text{ units of suffering.}$$

I'll conclude this discussion of resistance with my most productive exercise to motivate you to identify the critical need to pay attention to and make friends with all B-FIT suffering-producing components.

Do this experiment. Carefully, with gloves and eye protection, break a glass jar. Pick up a 2" piece of the glass, put it in the palm of your hand (no glove) and mindfully walk around your home with it for three to five minutes. Imagine it to be a baby. Do not drop it! Do the experiment before reading further!

Did you close your hand and hold the jagged piece of glass tightly to prevent it from falling, or did you hold it gently and rely on mindfulness for it not to fall?

Gently and mindfully is the only way to effectively carry pain without creating suffering.

How to Prevent and Manage Pain to Reduce or Relieve Suffering

1. Practise the “Concentrating and Focusing” exercise for 5 - 10 minutes.
2. Once concentration is relatively stable, the body is relatively relaxed, feelings are relatively calm and you are relatively more aware of image and talk thoughts, select a body discomfort or pain to be your field of focus.
3. Explore the pain’s location, shape, intensity and changefulness (rate of change).
Conduct each exploration for 2 - 3 minutes using the following spoken labels (either to self or out loud if alone):

Location	-	knee, elbow, head etc.
Shape	-	bigger, smaller, same
Intensity	-	stronger, weaker, same
Changefulness	-	fast, slow, jerky, same

Infuse each awareness with an intention to soften, relax, open to, and be gentle with all sensations.

Label at the end of each in-out breath cycle.

4. Now leave location, shape, intensity and changefulness in the background and select Feelings, Image thinking and Talk thinking as your field of focus. Follow Exercise B instructions to work with these components. Work Exercise B for 2–3 minutes as appropriate and helpful: regardless of thought content, just focus on the form. Label “image” or “clear,” “talk” or “quiet,” and the feeling flavour: for example, “irritability.”
5. Now look for and select a “cringe” body sensation associated with the pain sensation and repeat step 3, exploring the pain.
6. Select a location of physical discomfort or pain. Select either the epicentre or cringe location. Repeat steps 3 and 4 with this new focus.

General Helpful Hints:

- Initially let your awareness be called to one location and stay with it for the first applications of steps 3 and 4. Keep other sensations in the background for now. Eventually, keeping more than one sensation in your focus will be useful and possible.
- Continuously apply an attitude of “It’s all good;” welcome, welcome like greeting an old friend; label “Ahh-llow.”
- Pay special attention to the flavour of body sensations associated with fear.
- No white-knuckling: this will always make the suffering worse.
- Observe how at the moment of overwhelm, your strategy starts to collapse.
- Every emotional or physical pain can only overwhelm if it is accompanied by non- B-FIT mindfulness. Said more positively, if the strategies in Steps 1 to 6 are maintained, it is not possible to be overwhelmed by emotional or physical pain.