

Episode 15: 'Mindfulness Part 2 – Gratitude Practice'

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families)

Guest Speaker: Stephanie Wilson (Mindfulness Scotland)

Introduction:

Welcome back to another episode of Life with Alcohol and Drugs, from the charity Scottish Families.

Interview Begins

Rebecca Bradley:

Welcome back to another episode in our little series on mindfulness. We are joined again by Stephanie, who works alongside Mindfulness Scotland. In the last episode she did a settling and grounding practise with us, and also gave us a good summary of mindfulness. Stephanie, if you'd like to share a little bit of that, a recap of what the first session was? Then you can help us by looking at how mindfulness can help us notice the positives in our life.

Stephanie:

Okay, thanks, Rebecca. It's nice to see you again. Last time we talked a wee bit about how mindfulness, how we've all got the capacity to be mindful, but we can lose it a bit in the business and stresses and strains of adult life. We talked also about automatic pilot, which is that capacity we have to go from A to B throughout our day without really being aware of what's going on. We talked a wee bit about how that can be really useful because it helps us to get things done, but also, things can be changing in our inner world and in our inner experience, and before we know it, we might end up in a very stressed place in terms of our thinking, or a very low mood place in terms of how we're feeling and we're not quite sure how we got there. Mindfulness can just put the brakes on that process a bit and help us to notice things that are happening for us, so that we can take care of ourselves better and take action to prevent those negative things from happening.

The other aspect of mindfulness that's really interesting is that it helps us to notice our reactivity. So, when we are in automatic pilot, often we react just out of habit. You know when you get an email and you fire out an angry response, you honk the horn in the traffic, just out of a reactive pattern of well-worn behaviour, mindfulness can help us to put the brakes on that too.

It can help us step out of that tendency to be thinking about the future, overly thinking about the future in a way that's not helpful, or mulling over the past in a way that deflates our mood. Mindfulness, as we said last time, is just a way of stepping into the present moment, by choice and non-judgementally. That's just a wee summary of what mindfulness is. When we're on automatic pilot we have that narrow focus of just working our way through a to-do list. I'm sure we're all very familiar with that, which is definitely needed, but it does mean that with that narrow focus, we miss out on some of the stuff around and about that, that is actually really positive but we just manage to miss because we are lost in thought or focussed on the to-do list.

Rebecca Bradley:

Before we go into the gratitude practice, it's maybe something that people haven't heard of or wouldn't know what that means. So, how could that be helpful to practise gratitude and appreciation in your day?

Stephanie:

The way I look at it is that by practising a little bit of gratitude or stopping and noticing the things that are pleasant in life, even if they're only tiny, it is a wonderful antidote to stress. Gratitude is that quality of being thankful for things that are helpful or enjoyable in our lives, but first of all, you need to notice them. As I was just saying, if we are on automatic a lot of the time, we are reduced or we even lose that capacity to notice those little things. It's interesting because someone once said: Our brains are Velcro for negative thoughts or negative events, but Teflon for positive things. It's almost like we always notice the negatives, and the little nice things in our day slip off our brains. That can be really useful; it's actually related to how we are wired up to protect ourselves. Our stress system, or our fight or flight system is always scanning for danger, and as a species, that has kept us safe throughout the development of the human species. We are wired for survival, and that means that when we are threatened, we can respond really quickly and reactively without having to think about it. The difficulty with that is that it's not just a switch on/switch off type of process, it's almost like a dimmer switch. Our stress system can be switched right up to the top if we were to step out into the road and were about to be run over by a bus or something, we can get ourselves out of harm's way very quickly. But with the daily grind of day-to-day stress, it's almost like that dimmer switch is still on and all the physiology of stress, all the stress hormones and bodily responses to stress are happening at a lower grade and for a longer time. And that's because we are scanning for threats, scanning for danger, trying to keep ourselves safe from either real danger or perceived danger, the danger that we worry about that's not actually there.

That can be really stressful on our system, our mind and our physical health. But if we can stop, if we can put the brake on, just take a wee breather and mindfully notice even those tiny wee things in the day that are, I suppose, nourishing and supportive and delightful, what you would otherwise miss, that can really turn down that dimmer switch and reduce the stress chemistry in our body. There's actually quite a bit of research around the whole concept of gratitude. You can look it up, you can Google it, you can find all sorts of stuff on the internet. The benefits of practising, deliberately choosing to focus on and practise gratitude has so many health benefits, including even things like a better night's sleep. So it's often really helpful to practise a little bit of gratitude just before you go to sleep, it produces a lot of feel-good chemistry. It helps our brain to wire in happier memories, it might help us to dream about nicer things. So it's worth experimenting with.

Rebecca Bradley:

I do know that a lot of the family members that we support, who are or could be living in chaos every day, it's that whole stress response as you were talking about. There may be behaviours or events that they are expecting because it has happened before, so you can see how gratitude might help them with that, even if it was taken a few minutes before they go to sleep, just to write three things that maybe made them smile that day or that they were grateful for. I think that this technique will be really beneficial, just for helping people to break that sort of rotation they get into of always expecting the worst things to happen.

Stephanie:

I think one really important thing to say here is that from a mindfulness perspective, practising gratitude is not just the power of positive thinking, it's not forcing yourself to scabble around for something positive because you feel you should. Sometimes life doesn't have a lot of positives in it, and we need to understand that. Mindfulness is very much about noticing what is here and not pretending things are different to how they actually are. The way we practise gratitude in a mindfulness context is very body based. What I mean by that is that we find something that we genuinely have begun to notice is helpful, useful, pleasant, nourishing in our lives, and then we allow ourselves to feel that under our skin. That's, I suppose, the way that we really connect with the felt sense of gratitude in a way that allows that positive physiological chemistry to happen.

As I say, it's not just making a list of positives and beating yourself up because you don't feel good about life, it's really honestly looking for something. I think we're all very lucky to have something; it might be just that first cup of tea in the morning that you really enjoy before the day starts. It could be that you've got a nice warm shower in the morning, it could be a wee dog that you love, it could be that you've got a particular plant in your garden that's just so gorgeous that you love it. It doesn't have to be a big, massive thing. It's about noticing those little things, allowing ourselves to feel the effect of noticing in our body, and just savouring that benefit that we can often feel when the chemistry in our body starts to shift a little bit, in a way that's protective to us and gives us a bit of a break.

Rebecca Bradley:

It's so important. I'm going to let you take the lead on the gratitude practice, thank you.

Stephanie:

So, just for the purpose of now, you might want to sit down to do this practice, although you don't have to, you can do this practice anywhere. As we were saying, you might want to practise it lying down in your bed at night. Again, for the purpose of how we might here, I'm going to use our hands as a way of connecting with our body. I'll describe that as we go through it. Don't worry - I'll talk us through it.

You might want to get into a chair, have your feet on the floor like we did last time. Get your bottom right back in the corner of your chair so that you are nicely supported. Take a wee moment to make sure that you are really comfortable. It is actually okay to look after yourself, so make yourself nice and comfy. Then if you want to close your eyes, you can. Or if you choose to, you can just drop your gaze and soften your focus in front of you. We'll just take a wee moment to arrive, a bit like we did last time. We're beginning to just take a few, deep, slow breaths, let yourself arrive in this seated position. Maybe notice your feet on the floor, a sense of contact underneath your feet. And if it helps, you might get a sense of the ground beneath you, spreading out in all directions, offering you support. You might like to notice your bottom in the chair; what's it like to feel the weight of yourself going through the sitting bones and the thighs? Just arriving. You've arrived in this chair. Then maybe imagining a little thread at the top of your head, being gently lifted, a lift through the whole length of your back. See if you can find a way for your spine and your back to be a little bit longer, a little bit more space in there, a little bit of length and lift.

You can allow your hands to rest in your lap for now, just noticing that at this point in time there's nothing to do, just to be here. You might like to bring a wee bit of softness to your face, just noticing your body, sensations under your skin as you've arrived in this seated posture. And then noticing too that you are breathing. You might want to bring your attention to your breath for a moment, noticing the sensations of breathing in. Your body opening and receiving your breath. Then the sensations of breathing out. Maybe sensations of letting go, softening a wee bit, not holding on.

And already, of course, you might have noticed that your mind has wandered, which is perfectly normal. It's not a mistake, you are not getting this wrong. Each time your mind wanders, remember that you've got a choice to come back to what you are hoping to do here for the next few minutes, and that's to practise a bit of mindfulness, to be aware and awake of the sensations in your body and the practise of gratitude that we're going to explore together. If the mind wanders off, you just choose to come back to noticing your breath and noticing your body, noticing what you hear.

As we move to practising a little bit of gratitude, noticing that choice: we are choosing to notice some of the things in our life that actually nourish and support us. What a fantastic thing to do; to choose to notice the positives, giving yourself a break from all the relentless challenges that we all face. Focussing on the positives and being grateful, seeing how that feels.

To help us to do this, we are going to use our fingers. I'll just invite you now to take your right hand and curl the fingers of your right hand around your left thumb, so you are holding on to your left thumb as your hand is resting on your lap. You might just feel that contact between one hand and another, just bringing you back to a sense of your own body. Your right hand holding your left thumb. And as you do that, and as you become aware of your body, just maybe bringing to mind something that you feel grateful for. You might begin with a place, as an idea you might like to bring to mind a place that you go to that you just love to be in. It might be a garden, it might be a park, it might be a place by the sea, it could be anywhere at all. This is just a suggestion. It might be something else that immediately comes to mind where you'd rather spend time being grateful for, but the suggestion of a place, just draw that place to mind. Get an idea of the colours, textures, the quality of the air maybe. Don't get too caught up in thinking about it, just get a sense of that place. And now, noticing how that place makes you feel. As you begin to explore a sense of appreciation and gratefulness for this place that you have in your life, noticing how that feels under your skin, as you call to mind this place. Experiment with practising some gratitude, just really feeling grateful that you have this place to go to from time to time. Notice how it lands in your body: maybe a softening in the jaw, maybe a softening of your shoulders as they drop away from your ears, perhaps some warmth in the centre of your chest. Just sitting here and breathing, noticing how it feels to practise some gratefulness, maybe in this place that you have called to your imagination.

Allow your body to respond. As always in mindfulness, we're not trying to make anything happen, we're just allowing what's here to be here. We are noticing practising gratitude.

Now we can move our hand to our next finger, our index finger. You might like to bring to mind something about your home that you like that is really nourishing for you. It might be a big thing or a little thing. It could be a room that you enjoy sitting in. It could be just a chair that's your chair. It could be your favourite mug. It could be a wee spot outside. It could be anything at all. It may be something really small. Take a wee moment to call to mind something about your home that is nourishing, in which you feel contented, calling it to mind as you hold your index finger. Just by choice, expressing internally a sense of gratitude for that thing about your home that gives you a sense of contentment, something you appreciate, no matter how small, just breathing in with the thought of it, with that expression internally of gratefulness and appreciation for this little thing. And noticing how your body feels and doing this as honestly and authentically as you can; not trying to make anything happen or force yourself to feel something that isn't there. Just planting little seeds of appreciation for something, no matter how tiny that may be, and noticing how it feels in your body.

As we now move our hand around our third finger, our right hand is curling around your third finger. And if you'd like to, you might like to bring to mind a person in your life who helps you. Maybe it's not a person, maybe it's your pet, a little dog or a little creature or contact in your life that's really supportive, even if it's only in a small way. Understanding that life is never perfect and people are never perfect, but still, no warts and all, just looking for somebody who offers you support, even if that's just from

time to time. See if you can feel some appreciation for that person or that little animal who supports you, that little companion. Again, just noticing that you're not wanting to get into a whole big story in our heads. Keep it as simple as you can, maybe just a memory of a time when someone was supportive and helpful. Noticing how that felt under your skin and bring in some appreciation for that experience in your life. Just sitting here and breathing, noticing how it feels to bring gratefulness for that contact, that supportive contact.

As we now move our finger to our fourth finger of our left hand, just holding on there, noticing that you are sitting here, your feet are on the ground, your seat is on the chair, the spine can lift and lengthen so that you are actually here. And bring to mind something else; it could be anything this time. Anything big or small that pops into your mind, that gives you a sense of joy or contentment, no matter how little. Maybe it's that first cup of tea in the morning, the sense of putting on some nice, warm socks when your feet are cold. Anything at all. I'll just give you a few moments to call to mind a little thing that you can honestly and genuinely bring an appreciation for. As you call that thing to mind and internally express a quality of gratefulness and appreciation, again, noticing how your body feels; that's the most important bit. What's going on around your neck and shoulders? Your chest area? Or any other part of your body, that felt sense of gratefulness. We are doing this with honesty and kindness for yourself. Just seeing how it goes. Having a go.

Your mind might be wandering off now with all this thinking and drawing things to your attention, so just coming back to your body for a moment and your breath, a sense of your hands making contact with each other. As we finally curl our fingers around our little finger on our left hand, little pinkie finger. Again, just bringing to mind anything that pops to mind that you feel genuinely grateful for. Maybe even considering that it might be something about yourself, something you've done well, or a quality about yourself that you don't take too much time to notice but it definitely is there. Something other people might like about you. Being a bit grateful for yourself maybe? If you find that you can. Or something else if that's better for you at this point in time.

As you just allow that awareness of something about yourself that you are grateful for or something else in your life that you are grateful for, as you allow that to develop in your mind's eye, you sit and you breathe with it as you hold on to your little finger. Just seeing how things might shift in your own body. What might you notice? How does it feel to bring a little bit of appreciation to the good things in life, no matter how small? To acknowledge them, to notice them, to allow the felt sense of them to arrive in your body? An antidote to stress. A chance to look after yourself. A chance to see some of the things that you might sometimes miss. With all of this, we are not forcing or beating ourselves up if we find it difficult.

Now you might like to let go of your little finger, and just cupping your hands together in your lap, almost like you are gathering all these things up: all the things that you've brought to mind, just holding them, maybe even adding in anything else that might pop to mind right now. Gathering up some of the things that support and nourish you, acknowledging them, bring some gratitude for them.

Now, just noticing again that you are here: your feet are on the floor. Your seat is in the chair. Your spine might be lifting and your shoulders can be relaxed, dropping away from your ears. You might like to bring softness back to your face if you have lost some of that. And you might like to now just bring your attention to your breath. If your mind is busy, you can choose to come to your breath, just letting go of your thoughts for a few moments, a bit like letting go of the human brain, just letting it drift off, letting your thoughts drift off, and choosing to come to and noticing your breathing.

Then, like we did last time, you might like to imagine your breath can expand into your whole body, so that your whole body is sitting here breathing, cupping these little grateful gifts in your hands. Sitting and breathing, perhaps with a felt sense of appreciation under your skin. Now we can choose to end the

practise by allowing yourself to take three full, deep breaths. Big breaths in with long, slow outbreaths. Breathing in what you need and breathing out to let go of what you don't need so that when you are ready, just let your eyes open again, come back to your day.

That's just a wee example of a gratitude practise. In that one I did give a wee bit of guidance about things that you might like to call to mind. It can be a wee bit difficult at first if it doesn't come naturally, but you can use your five fingers to bring anything you like to mind. In actual fact, this comes from a ten-finger practise, so you can go on forever. You can even include your toes if you want to.

Rebecca Bradley:

It is such a lovely way to look at things as well. I would just encourage anyone listening to keep coming back to that practice whenever they need it because it can put a smile on your face and it can make you think of things a bit differently, possibly. Thank you so much. We are very lucky because we've got you for the last session as well, so you will get to hear from Stephanie again with another practise.

Stephanie:

Good luck everybody. I hope that's helpful. Even if you can only hold on to your thumb and think of one thing, it's still worth doing. Take care.

Rebecca Bradley:

Thank you.

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.