

## Episode 16: Mindfulness with Stephanie – Part 3

*Podcast Transcript*

*Life with Alcohol and Drugs*

Host: Rebecca

Guest Speaker: Stephanie Wilson

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### **Introduction:**

*Interview Begins*

### **Rebecca:**

We are doing our last mindfulness session with Stephanie today, who is here on behalf of Mindfulness Scotland, and it's lovely to have you back with us. In the last two episodes of this series, we've looked at a grounding exercise and a gratitude exercise. If you haven't listened to them yet, you should go and have a wee listen and see how that might help you.

Today we're going to be doing the STOP practise. Stephanie, can you tell us a wee bit more about that?

### **Stephanie:**

Yes, and thanks for having me back, Rebecca, it's lovely to be invited. Yes, today we're going to look at a wee, short mindfulness practice that you can drop in at any point in your day. It's got an acronym: STOP stands for S T O P, and it's pretty much what it says on the tin. Sometimes these acronyms are a wee bit hard to remember but STOP stands for: S is for just stop. T is for take a breath. O is for observe what's going on within yourself at the point in time where you are stopping. P has several meanings: it can mean to pull back, get some perspective, and then proceed with whatever is going on in your day. I'll talk us through a practice, we'll do a STOP practice towards the end of this morning's session, and I'll guide you through those stages.

STOP is really a practice to help us to step outside of that automatic pilot that we've talked about in the previous chats that we've had. I suppose most people are aware of that experience of going through your day, going through your jobs, getting through your to-do lists, but most of the time not really being present with what you're doing. Often, we are just lost in thought, carrying on with our day. That, actually, can be really helpful. Automatic pilot means that we can get a lot done, but the downside to going around our day without any level of awareness of what's going on is that things can sneak up on us. We might find ourselves getting into a pattern of worried-type thinking. We might find that our mood is slipping or changing without us really being aware of those subtle changes because we're preoccupied with our thinking. We might notice that our body is getting tight and tense, or that might be happening without us noticing.

Particularly when we are stressed, these changes within our thinking, our feeling and how our body is, can sneak up on us without us noticing. Really, what the STOP practice is really helpful with is not just to help us to notice all of that, but also helping us to notice if we have slipped into patterns of reactivity, reacting to situations out of habit or a lack of awareness of what's actually going on.

In mindfulness we often talk about stepping out of reacting into a mode of responding. The problem with reacting in situations, particularly stressful ones, is that reacting often makes things worse. We're not perhaps taking the most skilful action. We're probably all aware of being triggered maybe by an

email or a text, and we fire back a response without just stopping, taking stock of where we are, taking stock of what's going on, and maybe responding in a way that's better for us, but also better for the situation.

That's where the STOP practice can be useful.

**Rebecca:**

I wanted to ask what you might notice when you are going through the practice, because if you can imagine, I feel like this kind of practice is for when there's quite a lot of chaos going on and you do need to stop and take a breath and stop the things that you are doing, like going 100 miles an hour, and taking a wee break. So, what might people notice when they are going through it?

**Stephanie:** Once we've stopped and grounded ourselves, which I'll guide you through in a wee moment, and basically just put the brakes on. When life's getting hectic, I envisage it as just putting a hand up: hang on a minute, just stop, settle, take a breath. It's almost as if by taking a breath we arrive in the moment. We have grounded ourselves, we've settled our breathing, which can often become quite agitated if we are in a stressful situation. The O for observe is probably the most complicated part of this wee practice. We talk in mindfulness about four areas of experience, and it's those four areas that I'll guide you through. Quite simply, it's what's going on in my thinking, how am I feeling, what's happening in my body? How we think and how we feel often have huge indications for what's going on under our skin and how our body feels. Then the fourth area is: what's my reactive impulse? What am I just about to do?

Often in a situation we react without taking...it happens so quickly, and as I said just a wee moment ago, it might be helpful, but more often than not, reacting when we're unaware of how we are is probably not the most helpful strategy. The O is for noticing, just what am I thinking? How am I feeling? How does my body feel in this current moment and what is my impulse? We're just putting a wee pause in there before we lash out or speak out or do something that might not be helpful. Then the P is: once we've noticed what's gone on for us in that moment, we can just pull back a bit, take a bit of space, maybe just take a different perspective. It might even be that we can introduce a wee bit of humour in our thinking about what's going on. Then the final definition of the P would be: okay, what's going on then? Proceed, but maybe proceed in a more skilful way.

STOP is: stop, take a breath. O is for our experience, pull back, take some perspective, and then proceed. Just putting the brakes on, giving us the chance to behave more skilfully.

**Rebecca:**

As somebody who deals with stress on a day-to-day basis, it can be hard to just stop, but it can also be quite hard to think that there's something out there that can help, something that can treat it. When you are in that stressful cycle, you are just going through it and through it and through it, and it can be quite hard to take yourself away from it, or even for a person who's with you to take you away from it. If you almost think about a panic attack, you need that way to breathe and things like that. With this practice, how can it help if you are feeling stressed? You've already explained quite a lot about it and what it can do, what it can help with and what it can make you think about, but in terms of our stress levels, how can it help you with how you're feeling?

**Stephanie:**

I think what this does is to open up an opportunity to, as I say, do something that's actually going to be supportive for yourself and helpful in the situation. If you can put the brakes on a stressful situation, the

type that you are just describing, it can have really profound implications for our health and wellbeing. If you notice I'm getting into that old worried look of ruminating about problems that I can't solve. If you notice that oh, I'm starting to get a bit low, I recognise this, my mood is slipping. What can I do? What do I know from the past that I can do to help to keep my mood more buoyant? Or if I'm becoming more anxious, is there something I need to do to maybe put the brakes on the anxiety? Could I chat to somebody? Could I go for a walk? Could I take some action of that type? So you notice if you're beginning to get into familiar worry patterns. You notice if your mood is beginning to slip. You notice as well how this is affecting your body: I'm tight around my neck and shoulders, is this going to trigger a migraine or a bad headache? Am I feeling tight in my stomach? Is this going to cause me problems if there's an underlying or familiar pattern of tension held in your stomach? All sorts of ways. Everyone is different.

In mindfulness we talk about the body barometer. A barometer is a little gadget that tells you about the change in the weather, and our body can often tell us if there's a change happening where we're heading for stormy times. Your body, as an individual, will have an area that's your particular barometer, or a place where you recognise that stress and tension will go to. So that's thoughts, awareness of the body, then reactivity: what am I just about to do and will it actually be helpful? Am I about to react in a way that might not improve the situation, might inflame the situation, and might bring more trouble my way? It's not good for the situation and it might make things worse for me too. That ability to just put the brakes on, take a pause, really reflect deeply, get to know yourself, your patterns of thinking and feeling, your stress barometer in your body, and also your reactive habits that might not be helping. It's a really useful tool, and it can be done really quickly.

**Rebecca:**

Excellent. It's definitely something that's needed, especially if it can be done really quickly, because sometimes we just don't have time, or we don't see the point in taking that time for ourselves because people are very selfless at times. They don't think that doing something for themselves will help, but you are going to take us through one of these STOP practices. I'm looking forward to hearing this.

**Stephanie:**

Okay. Here we go. For today, we are going to practice just with whatever is going on for you as you're listening to the podcast. It might not be a particularly stressful time, but it's still useful to practice this at times, at all sorts of points in your day, even if it's not a particularly stressful time, so that then if there is a stressful moment, you're quite familiar with the process.

We're going to do it sitting down but you can do it standing up, you can take yourself off and do it in the loo, behind a locked door, you can do it anywhere at all. But for now, I'm just going to invite you to take a really comfy seat and maybe get your tailbone right back into the chair, so you already feel a wee bit more supported. We're just going to put the brakes on, and practice STOP together.

You might want to close your eyes. You don't have to and, actually, if you're doing this in the heat of the day it might not be possible for you to close your eyes, but just for now I want you to close your eyes so you can really experience this practice and train ourselves in the different stages. We're sitting, we might have our eyes closed. We are stopping - that's the S - just stopping. And taking this moment to ground ourselves. You might like to take your attention to the soles of the feet. As far away from your busy mind as possible, and just notice how it is to feel the ground underneath you; a sense of contact and pressure, maybe a sense of the floor spreading out underneath you, offering you support in all directions. You are here. Your feet are on the floor. You might even want to notice your bottom in the chair. So, you've got a sense of stopping and arriving in the moment. We're here now.

Then the T is for just taking a breath. You might want to put your hands on your tummy area, just round about your belly button. Allow yourself to take three good, settling breaths. Big breaths in and then long, slow breaths out if you find you can. So, you are stopping and taking a breath, and you are doing that in a way that will help things to settle a bit within your internal physiology. Three deep, full breaths in. Long, slow out breaths. Then just settling into whatever breathing pattern is here for you naturally in this moment.

Then we get to the O part of the practice. This is where we begin to observe what is actually going on for us in this moment, whatever it is, whatever is going on.

You might like to begin by noticing what are the predominant thoughts in your mind at the moment? What's the nature of your thinking? Are there any familiar thoughts? Maybe worrying thoughts or planning thoughts? Maybe thoughts about when this situation has happened in the past? We often notice that our thoughts take us into the future or back into the past. That's simply what we're noticing; just noticing where our thoughts are.

Then, just taking stock of how you are feeling. Not trying to change anything, we're simply acknowledging how you might be feeling. If it's helpful, you might like to put a name on the feeling you are experiencing sadness, hopelessness, or maybe there's something more positive for you right in this moment, in this practice. Just seeing if you can identify how you are feeling. We don't often always put a word to this experience.

You are really getting to know yourself and how you are in this moment.

Now, I'll just invite you to have a wee scan through your body. How you are feeling under your skin in the fabric of your body. You might notice that this will change from practice to practice; how we are feeling and how we are thinking can have a profound effect on what's going on in our physical world and our physical experience. If it helps and you are noticing tension in any part of your body, you might see what it's like to soften that a little bit. Just let go if you can, of any tension in the neck, around the shoulders or back, seeing if it's possible to soften anything that's tightening in your tummy. Maybe you can let your chest area relax a wee bit. You might be able to let your breathing slow a little. Just noticing what's here in the first instance, then noticing if it's possible to let go a wee bit.

We're just taking stock of how we are. Now, just starting to notice what your impulses are in this moment. What are you wanting to do? Is there a reactive pattern of behaviour that you notice? Something you might recognise? Something you might habitually do in a situation like this? What's going on in your thinking and your feeling, how your body is? Behaviours are impulses that are springing to mind.

As we move to the P - is it possible now that you've acknowledged what's here, just to pull back a wee bit, create some space between yourself and the situation. Maybe take in a wider perspective; what else is going on around about this particular situation that you are finding yourself in? Is it even possible to bring a bit of lightness, a bit of humour to the intensity of what's here?

Of course, again, we're not trying to force anything to happen, it's just seeing what might be possible by way of a different perspective, a wee bit of pulled-back space. Then, when you are ready, you can just allow yourself to proceed into the next moments of your day, perhaps with a different course of action, but certainly, it was an acknowledgement of the challenges that you are currently facing. You might like to bring a wee bit of kindness to yourself as well, now that you know what's here. The challenges that are in front of you, the moment that you are in. With kindness and skill, just proceeding with the next steps in your day.

You can just open your eyes, take a wee moment to readjust to the light in your room. And that's the STOP Practice.

Actually, I found a quote from an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist. His name is Victor Franco, you may have heard of him. He's a psychiatrist and neurologist. I think he's passed away now, sadly, but he was also a holocaust survivor and he's written quite a few books about dealing with challenges, dealing with difficulty. A very wise man. One of the quotes that I'm familiar with that he said was, "Between stimulus and response there is a space, and in that space is our power to choose our response. And in our response lies our growth and our freedom." It's a really powerful quote. Often between stimulus and response there is no space because we don't allow it. So, opening up that space between something that happens and our reactivity to it gives us a choice about how we're going to respond. I think the interesting words there are in our response lies our growth, as a person but also in our freedom. So, always knowing that you've got freedom to choose is really quite powerful.

I'm delighted to be able to share that wee practice with you. Good luck everyone.

Obviously, we've taken the time and set aside just over ten minutes there to practice it, but you can do it in a flash once you become familiar with those stages, you can do it literally in half a minute. You can do it whilst you are talking to somebody, you can take yourself offside and practice it in a slightly more structured way. You can practice it any point in the day, but it is particularly useful when you notice that you are getting a bit shaky and shoogly, and life is beginning to become a bit more challenging.

So there you go.

**Rebecca:**

Thank you for coming back on.

**Stephanie:**

Thanks for asking me back.

**Rebecca:**

Definitely, if these little sessions that Stephanie has done, if they have helped you in any way, please keep coming back and listening to them and learn from them because they truly will make a difference to some people.

*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](mailto:helpline@sfad.org.uk). We also have webchat and further information on our website [www.sfad.org.uk](http://www.sfad.org.uk).