

SESSION ONE: Recognition

Welcome. I'm Alexa and I'm Keara and we are with UMKC Counseling Services. This is the Mind over Mood Workshop.

Let me start by giving a summary about the concept of MOM and then I will provide information about the structure of the workshops and what you can expect while participating in them.

MOM is a workshop that teaches skills to handle painful thoughts and feelings effectively, in such a way that they have much less impact and influence. The main concepts include **Recognition, Insight and Openness**. Many basic human emotions are inherently painful, including sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, fear, embarrassment, etc. Basically, **everyone experiences psychological pain**. Not only is pain a normal part of being human, but **pain communicates important information about our experiences**. Much like how the pain from a paper cut tells us that we have an injury, psychological pain serves a similar function.

Psychological pain is often what prompts people to seek counseling. MOM was not designed to get rid of or necessarily solve whatever it was that brought you into Counseling Services. No three-session workshop could do that. Instead, MOM focuses on **changing our relationship with our psychological pain and creating flexibility in how we respond to it**. *We do not have to get stuck with avoiding pain as our only option for managing it.* We can learn other strategies and tools to manage our distress.

MOM was designed to:

- help you gain a deeper understanding of the issue or issues that prompted you to seek counseling
- create flexibility in how you view and approach these issues
- help you become aware of your moment-to-moment experiences
- help you take the first steps towards living with a wide range of human emotions
- help you get a better sense of your personal values goals, and how you want to focus your energy.

The three seminars are divided into content that builds upon itself. Each topic in MOM gets its own week. **Today's session will focus on recognition of our internal experiences without judgement.** The second session will focus on increasing our understanding of our internal experiences and what they are communicating to us or what their purpose is. And in the third session, we focus on our values and choosing to move our lives in a more fulfilling direction.

There are **three sessions**, including today. We will be using your student workbook over the course of the 3 seminars.

We introduce a number of tools and strategies. There are in-session exercises and practice assignments, which are for you and only you. We do ask that you write your responses in the workbook because many of the in-session exercises build upon each other. To complete some written worksheets, you will be asked to look back on a prior assignment from time to time.

The skills taught in MOM are challenging ones that may take years to fully develop- that's ok! Remember, no one climbs Mount Everest in an afternoon. Give yourself space to learn, room for doubt, and permission to keep going if you slip on the snow going up. **Expect to feel uncomfortable.** If it ever feels like too much, feel free to stop doing the exercises.

Agenda

Today we're going to talk about several topics. We are going to.....

- focus on our internal experiences and responses to those experiences
- introduce the concepts of recognition, acceptance and mindfulness
- practice mindfulness and guided imagery
- discuss feeling stuck in psychological pain and how to get unstuck
- end with a discussion on language

Internal Experiences and Our Responses

Most people seeking counseling are experiencing some form of psychological pain, usually some **unpleasant or unwanted experience**. These unwanted experiences are **internal experiences or responses** – they are thoughts (including memories and images), feelings, physical sensations, urges to act, etc.

Basically, they are what is going on inside of us that other people can't see or feel.

Unpleasant/unwanted internal experiences or responses are often prompted by external events such as a breakup, conflict with a friend, not doing well in school, etc. For example, the unpleasant internal experience of sadness or anxiety may be prompted by the external situation of doing poorly on an exam..

Some unwanted or unpleasant internal experiences that students might seek counseling for include *thoughts like, "I have low self-esteem", emotions such as sadness, or anger, physical sensations such as stomach upset or tension in your body, memories such as "I want to forget...", regrets like "I wish I never..."*)

Although some psychological pain in life is inevitable, most of us try to minimize or avoid experiencing it. But, oftentimes, our attempts to minimize or avoid pain unintentionally lead to other problems, perpetuate the pain and/or leave us feeling stuck.

Now, think about your own unwanted internal experiences and take a moment to reflect back on your responses to managing them. **Turn to page 8** in your workbook. You will notice a section labeled "Facing the Current Situation." On the left is a column to list what you have tried in an attempt to avoid, eliminate, or control your response. On the right is a column for writing what these strategies have prevented you from doing. Please pause the video here and take a few minutes to work on this.

We try a lot of different things to avoid, minimize or control it. These control strategies can be effective for external situations. For example, if you don't like a new shirt you just bought online, you can return it. Problem solved.

We tend to apply these same problem solving strategies to our inner experiences. We believe that we should be able to control the way we think and feel in the same way we control problems in our environment. For example, to avoid the anxiety of interacting with new people, someone may avoid these types of interactions all together. While they may be successful in avoiding the anxiety of meeting someone new (short-term solution), they may create other

experiences, such as loneliness or sadness from missing out on new relationships and experiences.

Some of the methods that we use to minimize or avoid pain can have more significant consequences. For example, someone might choose to manage anxiety with alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, etc. They may shut off or numb their feelings completely. They may avoid by staying continuously busy.

Basically, our go-to responses aren't helping us. So now what? If what we are doing isn't working for managing our unwanted internal experiences, what do we do?

Recognition and Mindfulness

We slow down and check in with ourselves. We start with **Recognizing** the unwanted internal experience. In other words, before moving forward, we must arrive at where we are. It's like a trail map. In order for us to go to our destination, we need to know where we are starting.

The exercises today are intended to help you arrive where you are at in the present moment and begin to recognize your internal experience. The exercises introduce the core strategy of **mindfulness**, which is to purposefully notice or recognize yourself, as you are right now, with an attitude of openness and curiosity. You will begin to build the skill of checking in with yourself so you are better able to decide what action, if any, you can take to live your life more fully.

Breathing Space Exercise

This first exercise is designed to help you build the skill of recognition or noticing.

As we get ready to begin, keep in mind that you may find you have a strong reaction or no reaction to the exercises in this program. That's okay! Everyone experiences it differently. Strong reactions are not wrong or problematic; like the paper cut example from earlier, they are a sign that it's time to really pay attention and recognize your experience. Not having any reactions is okay too, it's just a sign that it will take some time to build these skills.

Expect to feel uncomfortable. As simple as these exercises appear on the surface, they can be challenging. If it ever feels like too much, feel free to stop doing the exercise and move on.

I invite you to get comfortable in your chair, let your shoulders drop and gently push your feet onto the floor... get a sense of the ground beneath you...you can soften your gaze on a particular spot in front of you or close your eyes, whichever you prefer.

Just take a moment to notice how you are sitting (*pause*) Notice how you are breathing (*pause*) Notice what you see, even if your eyes are closed...(*pause*) Notice what you can hear...(*pause*) Notice what you feel against your skin and the way your body presses into the chair...(*pause*)

Notice what you can taste or sense in your mouth...(*pause*) Notice what you can smell or sense with your nostrils...(*pause*) By settling into the moment and into your body, you are inviting your mind and your ability to recognize into the present moment with you...(*pause*)

Take a moment to become aware of your breath and the gentle movement in and out as air is exchanged in your nose, mouth, and lungs. Note the sensation in your belly or chest as the gentle movement of air creates a rise and fall... (*pause*) Simply allow yourself to notice sensations as a curious scientist that has never encountered breathing before. (*pause*)

Now see if you can notice the movement of your mind as you're observing these sensations, with no need to change or do anything about them... See if you can observe the activity of the mind becoming more evident as you notice yourself noticing your sensations. (*pause*)

You will find this hard because your mind is a masterful storyteller. It will tell you all sorts of interesting things to grab your attention and pull you away from what you are doing. (*pause*) See if you can let those thoughts come and go, as if they are merely trains passing through a train station- just passing through as

you observe the station itself. *(pause)* Keep your attention on the breath, noticing your breath flowing in and out. *(pause)*

When a new thought arises, see if you can notice the thought as just another train passing through. Simply notice-without judgment- as it goes by as you continue to feel the rise and fall of your chest. *(pause)* From time to time, your mind will succeed in distracting you with a new and interesting thought, and you'll lose track of your breathing. This is normal, natural, and will happen repeatedly. Once you notice this has happened, take a moment to note with curiosity what hooked you and gently return back to focusing on your breathing. *(pause)*

Now allow yourself to come back to your breath. Notice the movement of air in your chest and belly. Allow the sensation of breathing in to become the focus of your attention. Notice the coolness of the air as you breathe in and the warmth as you breathe out. *(pause)* Notice the sensations in your feet as they touch the ground and in your body where it touches the chair. *(pause)*

As you prepare to bring your awareness back to the room, offer yourself some gratitude, perhaps for taking time today to be present with your thoughts, and for choosing to take steps towards living your life more fully. When you're ready, take one more deeper breath, opening your eyes as you exhale.

Take a moment to reflect on your experience during that exercise. Pause the video here and take a few minutes to jot down your reactions on **page 8** in your workbook.

How was that exercise? You may have noticed yourself wanting to pull away, push those thoughts and feelings aside, beat yourself up for having them, and maybe even telling yourself this is a waste of time or you have somewhere else to be. That's okay. Just try and recognize your feelings without judgment.

The exercise we just completed is one strategy that can teach us to recognize our internal experiences. When we feel stuck with unwanted thoughts or feelings, we can begin with recognizing what our responses are to those unwanted internal experiences.

Rather than treating those unwanted experiences as our enemy or being hard on ourselves for having them, we can begin recognizing those experiences as a signal that maybe we are stuck, or what we've been doing isn't working. By recognizing what isn't working, we **open up space to try something else**. This helps build some flexibility for effectively working with those concerns. Let's talk about this using a **metaphor of a finger trap**. If you are not familiar with this, take a second and look it up online.

- Imagine how a finger trap works. You want to pull away to get out.
- But that doesn't work; the trap just gets tighter, and you get more stuck.
- The solution goes against your intuition or your typical reactions.
- In order to get free of the trap, we need to **lean in** to get wiggle room

In our struggle to get rid of what we don't want, we get more stuck. Much like we would do with the finger trap, we need to lean into our unwanted internal experiences in order to get wiggle room. If we stop fighting our experiences, we create space; space that allows us room to get ourselves where we want to be.

AGE Technique

This exercise builds on the last one and gives you another tool you can use to recognize your experiences in the moment.

We will use the AGE Technique--Arriving-Gathering-Expanding. There are three basic steps to this practice

- **Arriving** – is the first step, which involves stepping out of automatic pilot by asking yourself, “Where am I?”, “What’s going on?” The aim is to recognize the moment that you are in. This is finding the “You are here” sign on the map.
- **Gathering** – is the second step, which involves gathering the scattered or wandering mind to focus on one thing only. In this exercise, we will continue building the skill of focusing on breath.

- **Expanding** – which is the third step, adds a level of complexity. It will have you practice holding focus on both the breath and the body simultaneously.

Remember: If it ever feels like too much, feel free to stop doing the exercise.

Begin by settling yourself into a comfortable position where you are sitting, perhaps sitting upright with your feet flat on the floor, your arms and legs uncrossed, and your hands resting in your lap or on your thighs, whatever is more comfortable. Let the body express a sense of being present and awake.

Close your eyes if that feels comfortable for you. If not, keep them open and soften your gaze, focusing on something a few feet in front of you and toward the floor.

The first step is being aware, really aware, of what is going on within you right now....becoming aware of what is going through your mind. What thoughts are there? As best you can, just notice the thoughts as mental events. Simply observing the thoughts. *(Pause)*

Then taking some time to notice the feelings present in this moment. In particular, noticing any uncomfortable or unpleasant feelings...maybe these are feelings you've been avoiding, or feelings that have been building, trying to get your attention...Rather than trying to push them away or shutting them out, turn towards them. Allow yourself to just acknowledge these unpleasant feelings, perhaps saying to yourself, "Ah, there you are, that's how it is right now." *(Pause)*

Now, turn your attention to the sensations present in your body. Just observing... acknowledging the sensations.... Are there sensations of tension?...pressure?... perhaps feeling your heart beating?... whatever you are feeling...notice where those sensations are in the body. Just allow yourself to become aware of them...allowing them to enter into your awareness...simply observing them for what they are in this moment...*(Pause)*

Now you've got a sense of what is going on right now. You have **Arrived**. You've stepped out of automatic pilot and into your experience. *(Pause)*

The second step is to **GATHER** your awareness by focusing on a single thing—the movements of your breath. So, now, really **gathering** yourself, focus your attention on the movements of your belly...the rise and fall of your breath...Spend a minute or so focusing on the movement of your abdominal wall just below the rib cage . . . moment by moment, breath by breath, as best you can...noticing the differing sensations of your belly and chest as you breathe in... as you breathe out...(Pause) Simply be aware of the feeling of the air entering the mouth or nose, gently expanding the lungs, and slowly leaving the body...You may observe the mind wandering off. That's okay. Simply notice and gently return your focus to your breathing. (Pause)

Knowing when the breath is moving in and when the breath is moving out... Noticing, if you can, whether there is a pause between breaths...how does it feel when you inhale...what does it feel like when you exhale...curiously observe your breath (Pause) Just concentrate your awareness on the pattern of movements, breathing in and breathing out ... gathering yourself, using the anchor of the breath to be really present in the current moment. (Pause)

Now, as a third step, allow your awareness to **Expand** beyond your breath and into the body. Bring your awareness to your whole body as well as to your breath...creating a more spacious awareness... Noticing any areas of tension or holding. If you feel like it, briefly scan the body, releasing any tension you observe as you breathe out ...feet, legs...buttocks, back...stomach, hands, arms...shoulders, neck, face, and scalp... Following the breath as if your whole body is breathing... Holding it all in this slightly softer . . . more spacious awareness... (Pause)

In a moment, return to your usual sense of awareness, bringing with you a sense of calmness that wasn't there before...a sense of your capacity to gently hold your experiences in your awareness...holding and observing your experiences lightly...aware that they are your experiences, for now, and, as with all experiences, subject to change with each new moment.

When you are ready...take a deeper breath, slowly breathing out and just allowing your eyes to open whenever you are ready. (Pause)

Take a moment to reflect on your experience with this exercise. Again, pause the video here and jot down your reactions on **page 9** in your workbook.

Before we wrap up this first session, this is a quick tool you can start using right away. Throughout your day or week, as you become aware of your experiences, try adding the words, “I am having the thought...” or “I am having the feeling....” For example, “I am having the thought that I am going to fail my class.” Or “I am having the feeling of guilt.” Instead of fighting your experiences or feeling like you have to *do something* about them, this helps you recognize thoughts or feelings for what they are: just thoughts and feelings. No judgment or action is needed, you just observe them. This will begin to allow you more flexibility and space between your experience and yourself.

Today this session focused on skills to **Recognize** where you are in the moment, including unwanted or uncomfortable internal experiences and reactions to them without judging yourself. Next session we will talk about **Insight**, or what those experiences might say about what is important to us.

Before you watch the next session of this series, we encourage you to:

- Practice the thought exercise.
- Take some time to breathe and practice intentionally **Recognizing** your experience.
- Your workbook has exercises, or you can use a variety of apps or podcasts to help you. Although we used the breath as a focus, you can practice this skill with the other senses, visualization, or other guided meditations. See the appendix on page 21 of your workbook for a list of helpful tools.
- Page 10 in your workbook has journal space for practice sessions.
- **Make a commitment to yourself to practice.** Treat it like any other appointment. If you can't commit to 15 minutes every few days, try 5 minutes every day. You can practice at a certain time of day (like bedtime), set a reminder on your phone, download an app to remind you, or use an environmental reminder (ie, every time you sit down to eat). This is your time. The more you put into it, the more you will get out of it.