

# Thin Eats Fat - And the Practice of Mindfulness

Yael Schweitzer, LCSW, BC-DMT

August 10, 2010

Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob was famous for his ability to interpret dreams. The biblical story tells us that when he was in Egypt the Pharaoh had two dreams. In the first he saw a field with seven healthy and ripe sheafs (bundles) of grains and seven thin sheafs of grain consumed them. In the second dream there were 7 healthy, fat cows coming up from the Nile and after them, 7 lean, bad looking cows came up and ate the healthy ones. No one knew the meaning of the dreams until Joseph was called to the palace. His interpretation of the dreams was that there are going to be 7 good years for Egypt but after that, 7 years of drought will hit and bring famine. Joseph suggested taking advantage of the good years to store wheat in the barns so that when the 7 bad years arrive there will be food to feed the people. When the years of famine arrived, people from all over the region, not just Egypt, came to find food - including Joseph's family - but this is another story.

When I introduce the mindfulness practice to my clients, I encourage them to practice regularly, not just when they feel desperate and overwhelmed. I recommend continuing with the practice so that they are prepared for difficult times. Of course, usually clients seek therapy when the "thin cows" are already present in their lives. At that point, when a client is introduced to the mindfulness approach, the concept of bringing awareness to thoughts and emotions and learning not to be carried by their content is appealing and rewarding. Some people experience a pretty fast relief from symptoms and are encouraged. They feel that they start gaining control over their lives. The gentle and accepting attitude inherent in the mindfulness approach and learning to apply kindness and compassion to themselves add to their improvement.

At this point a big challenge arises - how to keep what has been achieved, how to continue to heal and improve and how to avoid back sliding.

Bringing mindfulness to moments in our lives, to the present and all that it encompasses is the main goal in the context of Mindfulness-Based Therapy. The intention is that when a cycle of depressing thoughts emerges, something disturbing happens, pain arises, or relationships cause hurt, then the client has the inner resources to apply awareness and attention. In other words, she/he can be mindful of his/her reactivity in a way that will help meeting the challenge in a skillful way.

The practice demands investment - self discipline, inner intention, dedication and persistence. It asks us to let go of lifelong habits and human tendencies. The luring effect of thoughts is strong - we all want to feed our thoughts, believe in them, be carried by them, even when they set a trap for rumination, worries, self inflicting and defeating content. The converse is also true - we like to be carried by pleasant thoughts, wishes and emotions. Recognizing this tendency and learning to gain control

over our reactivity and clinging to thoughts, emotions, events and life's challenges is dependent on persistent practice.

I encourage clients to practice at home in between sessions. Even a daily short practice can support the building of a new positive habit. The formal practice, the structured meditation, supports strengthening the "muscles" of mindfulness in a methodical way. One learns to shift awareness from thoughts to the breath, or learn to bring curiosity, interest and a non judgmental approach to the process of thoughts or to the expression of emotions. Slowly these experiences loosen the grip of the controlling mind. The non-formal practice, bringing awareness to mundane activities or to inner reactivity in specific situations, helps to establish an understanding that mindfulness can be applied when the intention is there, and can be called in time of need.

In order to be able to adopt the mindfulness approach and really implement it when another wave of depression, anxiety or stress hits - one needs to be prepared. Like Joseph, we are called to recognize the changing nature of things and know that at times when we are healthy and strong we can prepare for the thin years or moments.

We don't need premonition dreams to know that thin years, weeks, days or even thin moments will come. Being human makes us vulnerable to loss, hurt, failure, worries, disappointment - the list is endless. To own the means of coping with "thin times" in a skillful way, one better start practicing now.