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SESSION 2

Automaticity

AUTOMATICITY

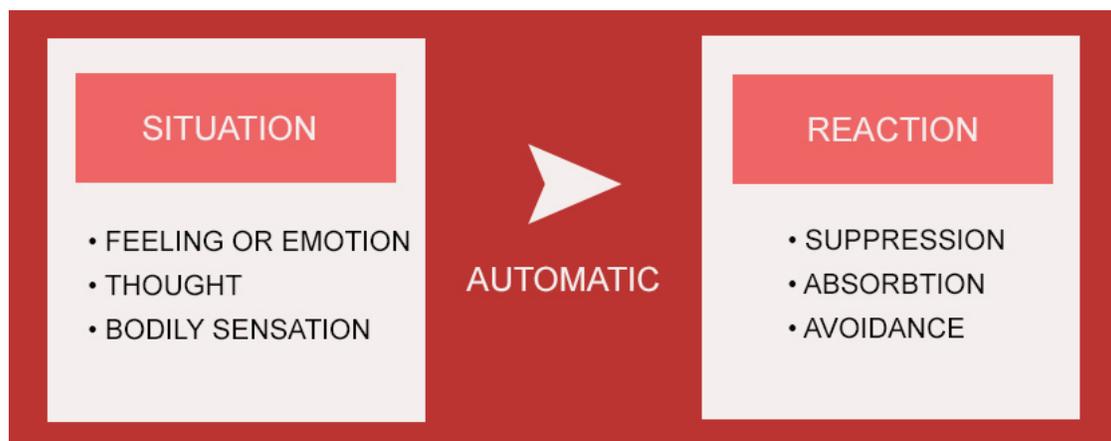
Automatism involves a behavior occurring outside of conscious awareness, that is, when we are not consciously aware of our own behavior. Although it may be difficult to imagine, some researchers believe that 90% of our behavior is carried out automatically. A clear example of automatic behavior is driving a car. If you are an experienced driver, you will likely not be aware of the process of changing gears, the movement of your feet while doing so, and the way you hold the steering wheel. Automatic patterns develop through repetition. By repeating a certain action, it gradually becomes automatic, thereby reducing the need for conscious attention.

Automatic patterns are not limited to behavior, like driving a car or playing the piano. Thoughts patterns or coping with setbacks or stress can also become automatic. Although in some cases, automatic behavior is very useful, it can also cause serious problems.

Fig. 1 displays how a certain feeling, thought, or sensation can automatically lead to a reaction, like suppression or worry, for instance. In these situations, we are not in conscious control of the reaction. The reaction is the result of an unconscious tendency. Consciousness is not involved in the relationship between a trigger and later response. This way of dealing with situations is referred to as impulsivity or reactivity.

Automatism can be changed through attention. Therefore, becoming aware of automatic patterns is at the core of many psychological treatments, like for instance cognitive behavioral therapy. As already pointed out in session 1,

Fig. 1 Situations triggering automatic reactions

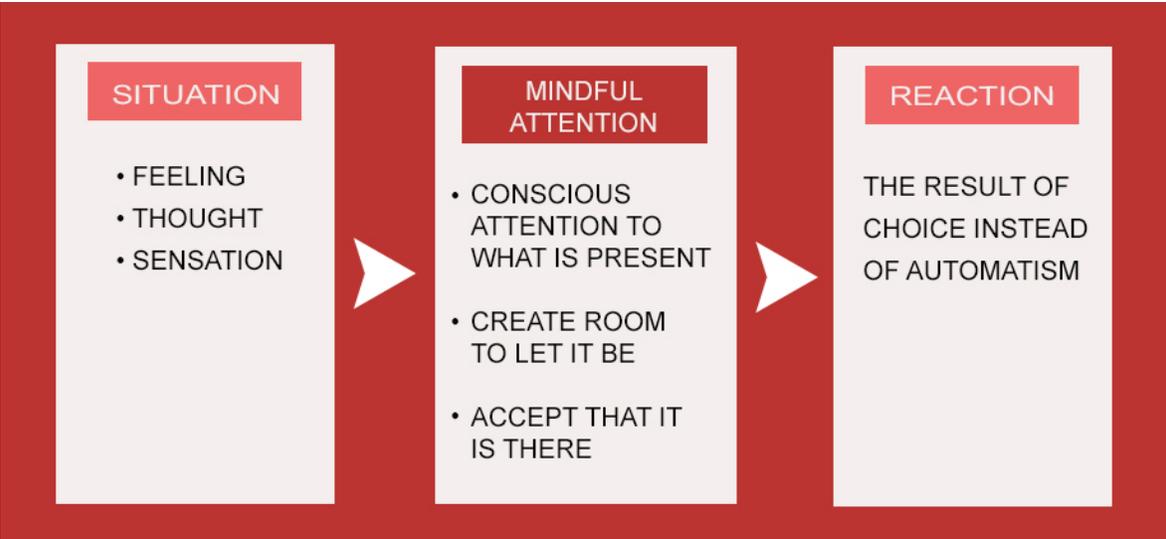


attention is a central aspect of mindfulness. This attention can be used to recognize automatic

reactions and patterns. These patterns can be changed only when they are recognized.

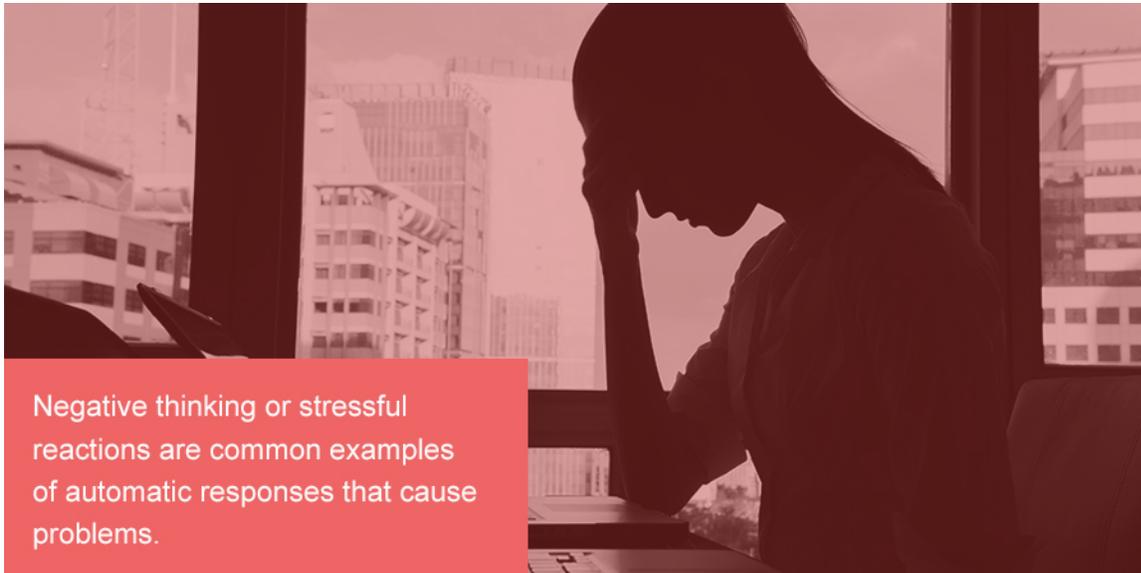
Mindfulness promotes attention to feelings, thoughts, and sensations. In other words, mindfulness promotes the awareness of what is present in the here and now. By paying attention, space is created between what is happening in this moment and the reaction that follows. If we experience an emotion like anger, mindfulness helps us pause for a second and pay attention to the experience. By paying attention to the emotion and staying connected to the experience, the chance of reacting impulsively is reduced. Thus, instead of automatically reacting aggressively (for instance by raising your voice at another person),

Fig. 2 Mindfulness creates room between a situation and a reaction



we direct attention to our own emotional experience, through consciousness. Ultimately, a conscious choice rather than an automatic response will guide the reaction that follows (see Fig. 2).

The existing research findings show that mindfulness helps reduce automatic responding. Consequently, conscious choice seems to guide behavior to a greater extent compared to automatic, unconscious reactions (Cahn & Polich, 2009; Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008; Moore & Malinowski, 2009). Accordingly, people who are more mindful have also been found to be less impulsive (Brown & Ryan, 2003).



CYCLES

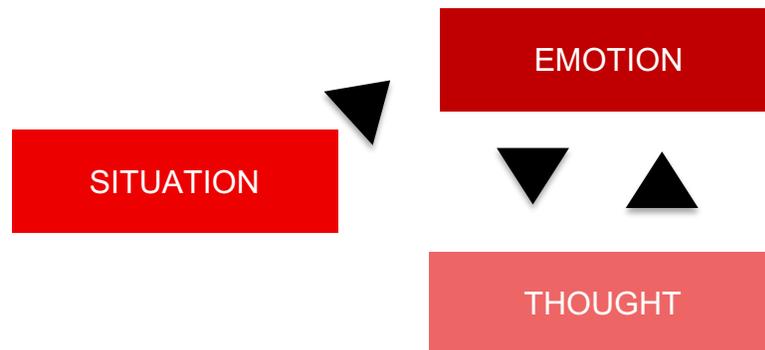
Automatism can also cause us to get stuck in a negative cycle of feeling and thinking. Fig. 3 depicts an example of such a cycle. Imagine you receive a bad evaluation (situation). An immediate result of this news is a feeling of sadness or frustration (feeling or emotion). Often, we automatically start thinking. Our thoughts may concern the feeling (“this is no good, I don’t want this, this must stop”) or the situation (“how could this ever happen?”) or the self (“maybe I am just not good enough”). These thoughts can cause feelings or emotions that can trigger further negative thoughts, etc.

It is also possible that the bad evaluation first triggers thoughts (“This can’t be true,” “I am a failure”) that produce negative emotions, like embarrassment or frustration, which then trigger new thoughts, and so on. Regardless of what triggered first (thoughts or emotions) by a situation, when we are not aware of this automatic interplay between thoughts and emotions, we can get caught in a cycle of thinking and feeling for a very long time. Because we are paying so much attention to our thoughts, we lose awareness of what is happening; instead, we are caught in a game of feelings and thoughts (see Fig. 3), which often leads to excessive worrying or ruminating (repetitive and negative thinking about the past).

The situation depicted in Fig. 3 shows how we can get completely lost in a train of thought. We are devoting so much attention to our thoughts that we lose ourselves completely in them. All our attention goes to the content of our thoughts. We are not present in the now anymore; instead, we are living a life that is played out in our head. Our thoughts determine automatically our

feelings. We are slaves to our thoughts and barely notice how we shift between thoughts and feelings.

Fig. 3 Example of an automatic cycle of thinking and feeling



Even if we notice that the above described process is taking place, we often use strategies (like for instance suppression or putting things in perspective) that not only fail to get us out of the cycle, but pull us back in it. From a rational point of view, these strategies appear to be effective in helping individuals get out of the cycle. However, the more we attempt to avoid or get rid of the thoughts and feelings, the more they persist.

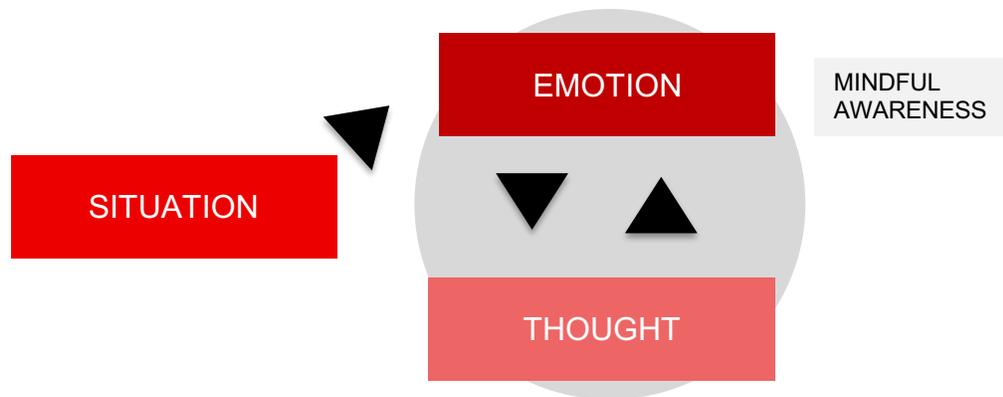
ATTENTION TO THE HERE AND NOW

By paying attention to the thoughts and feelings that are present in the current moment, we can disrupt the cycle and create room for awareness. This awareness allows us to observe the cycle between thoughts and emotions (see Fig. 4). For instance, if you receive a bad evaluation that automatically triggers negative thoughts, mindfulness involves taking a step back and noticing these thoughts. Hence, it becomes important to pause for a moment and focus on breathing. Then become aware of what is going on inside of you. What thoughts are currently running through your mind? What kind of feelings are present in this moment? Where in your body do you notice these feelings? By taking the role of a neutral and curious observer, the automatic cycle of thinking and feeling is disrupted. If you notice that you are not observing anymore but that your thoughts or feelings are taking you away again, simply focus on your breathing once more and use this neutral point to take the role of an observer again.

Note that you are not trying to change the emotions or feelings that are present, but rather, you are trying to observe and accept what you experience. By turning attention back to the present

moment, you create room and insight. Thus, mindfulness can help you become aware of the automatic influence of thoughts on emotions and vice versa. Thoughts and emotions are not changed or modified; instead, the way in which you relate to these emotions and thoughts is altered. Feelings are less guided by thoughts, and you become more like an observer. In this observer mode, your thoughts no longer dictate your feelings and your actions.

Fig. 4 The role of mindfulness in an automatic cycle of thinking and feeling



PRACTICE: EATING WITH AWARENESS

Start with becoming aware of your posture. Close your eyes for a few seconds and focus on breathing. Now, open your eyes, but wait before taking the first bite. Look at the food, the color, the texture. Just become aware what is in front of you. You can also briefly consider the amount of work necessary to make this food possible.

Then take a first bite. Eat slowly, one bite at a time, prolonging the sensation of the food in your mouth and on your tongue. Try to become aware of the taste, the movement of the fork, and the whole eating process as much as possible. Thoughts will come up and will distract you. This is normal. Just notice them and gently direct your attention back to the food. It is easier to eat mindfully without external distractions, such as television, magazines, and the like. Make eating the meal the most important activity. Devote all your attention to it.

INFORMATION: EATING WITH AWARENESS

Eating is a daily habit that involves many automatic processes. Eating does not always require focused attention. We can easily have dinner and watch television, send an email, or have a conversation at the same time. When we do so, we become less aware of the process of eating and tasting the food. Our attention is not focused on the sensation of eating but on the television,

email, or the content of the conversation. When this happens, we tend to enjoy the food less.

During the body scan, a certain body part becomes the anchor of our attention. If we practice mindful eating, what we experience while we eat (e.g., the taste, smell, and texture of the food) becomes the anchor of our attention. When you eat mindfully, you will notice how many times your attention is drawn away from eating by thoughts or other distractors. The idea is to gently direct attention back to the anchor, the experience of eating.

This exercise can show you that even when your attention should be focused on eating the food in the present, when you take a bite and before you even swallow, your mind is already focusing on the next bite. This is a pattern that is often present when eating candy, chips, or other comfort food.

Mindful eating can contribute to a healthier pattern of eating. Mindfulness reduces emotional eating (Alberts, Thewissen, & Raes, 2012) and can help contribute to a healthier weight (Tapper et al., 2009). Because mindful eating reduces the speed of eating, you satisfy your hunger earlier and thus end up eating less. This reduces the chance of overeating (and thus the consequences like high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer as well).

AT HOME

- Do the “eating with awareness exercise” one or more times this week.
- Practice the “Body Scan.” For more information on the “Body Scan,” see “Session 1”.
- Choose three routine activities, different from the previous week, and try to complete them with as much undivided attention as possible. Notice how often your thoughts, emotions, or body sensations automatically draw away your attention from what you are doing.

- This week, I will do the following routine activities with full attention:

1

2

3

- If you notice this week that you are worrying or ruminating or are brought out of balance by a certain situation, try to pause for a moment. Can you re-focus your attention on the experience in the present moment? Can you let the feeling be and become aware of the thoughts that automatically arise? Can you become aware of the cycle that is described in this session's chapter?

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

TUESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

WEDNESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

THURSDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

FRIDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

SATURDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

SUNDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

NOTES
