

3

WyngateCare 
Your life Your choice

SESSION 2

Automaticity

AUTOMATICITY

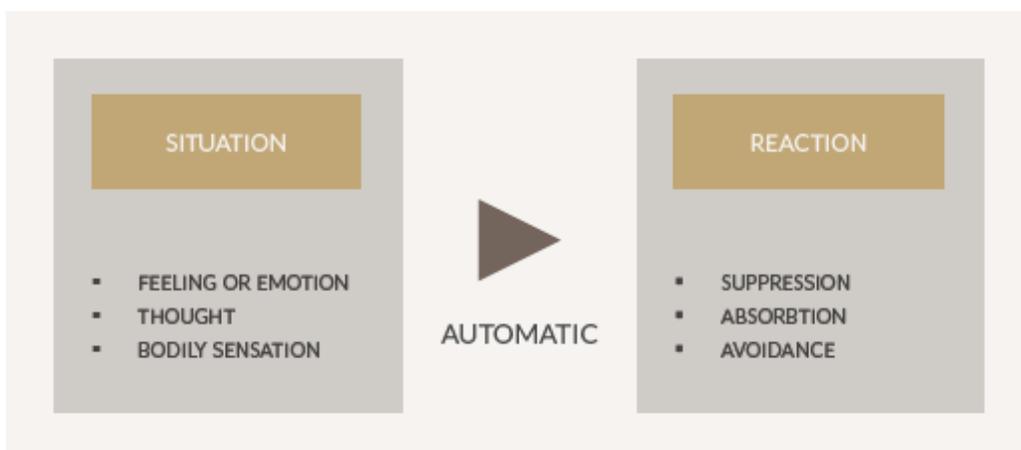
Automatism involves behavior that is guided outside conscious awareness. That is, when we are not consciously aware of our own behavior. Although it may be hard to imagine, some researchers believe that 90% of our behavior is carried out automatically. A clear example of automatic behavior is driving a car. If you are an experienced driver, you probably will 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 emerge through repetition. By repeating a certain action over and over again, 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, but can also concern the initiation of thoughts or dealing with setbacks or stress. Although in some cases automatic behavior is very handy, it can also cause serious problems.

Fig. 1 displays how a certain feeling, thought or sensation can automatically lead to a reaction, like for instance suppression or worry. In these situations, we are not in conscious control of the reaction. The reaction is the result of an unconscious tendency. There is no room for consciousness between the trigger and our reaction. This way of dealing with situations is referred to as impulsivity or reactivity.

The only way to change automatism is by means of 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,

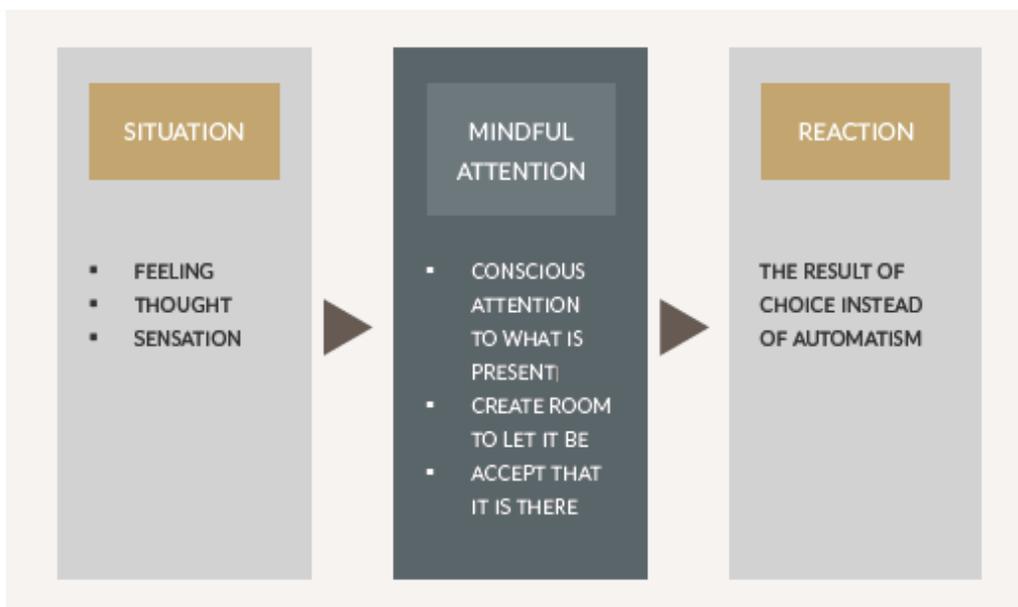
Fig. 1 Situations triggering automatic reactions



attention is a central aspect of mindfulness as well. This attention can be used to recognize automatic reactions and patterns. Only if these patterns are recognized, they can they be changed.

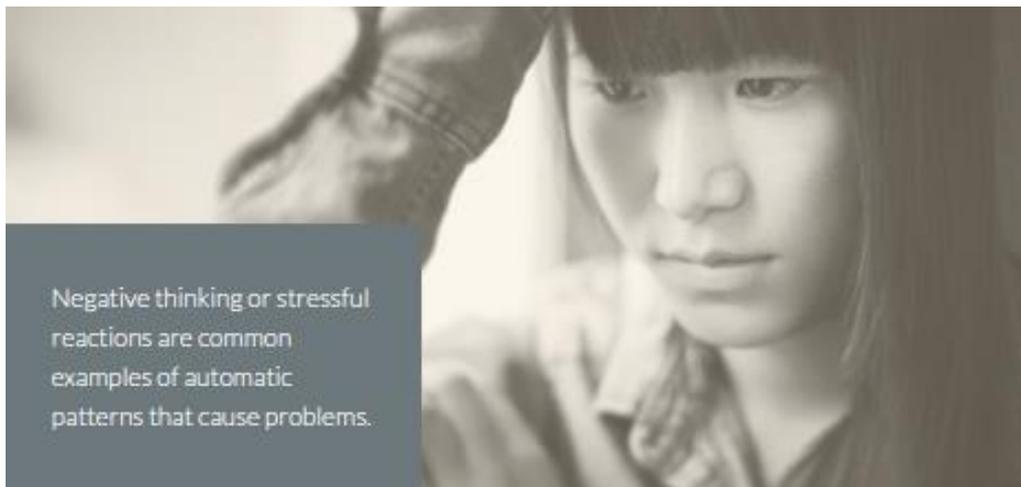
Mindfulness promotes attention to feelings, thoughts and sensations. In other words, mindfulness cultivates awareness for what is present in the here and now. By paying attention, space is created between what is happening in this moment and the reaction that follows. If we experience an emotion like anger, mindfulness helps to pause for a second and devote attention to the experience. By giving 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



attention is now being directed at our own emotional experience. You could say that you take a small break to allow some consciousness in. Ultimately, the reaction that follows will be guided by a conscious choice, not an automatic reaction (see fig. 2).

Research findings show that mindfulness helps to reduce automatic responding. Consequently, behavior is guided to a greater extent by conscious choice and less by automatic, unconscious reactions (Cahn & Polich, 2009; Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008; Moore & Malinowski, 2009). In line with this, people who are more mindful, have also been found to be less impulsive (Brown & Ryan, 2003).



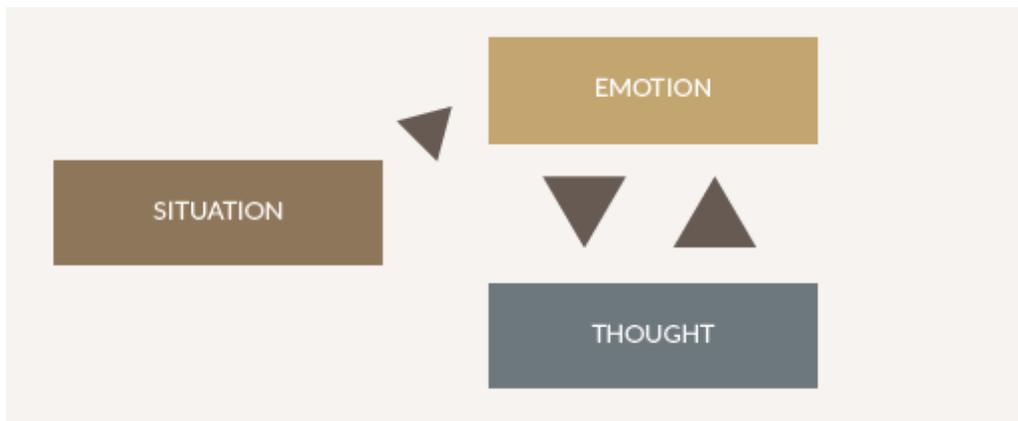
CYCLES

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, which can lead to thoughts again, etc.

It is also possible that the bad evaluation first triggers thoughts (“This can’t be true”, “I am a failure”) which in turn result in negative emotions like embarrassment or frustration, which cause new thoughts to emerge, and so on. Whatever is triggered first (thoughts or emotions) by a situation, the point is that 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: we are caught in a game of feelings and thoughts (see fig. 3). This is an example of how we sometimes easily get lost in worrying or ruminating (repetitive and negative thinking about the past).

The situation that is 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, but are living in our head. Our thoughts determine automatically how we feel. We are a slave to the thoughts and barely notice how we are being moved between thoughts and feelings.

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



And 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 even more than before. From a rational point of view, these strategies appear to be an effective way to exit the cycle. However, the more we attempt to avoid or get rid of the thoughts and feelings, the more they will persist.

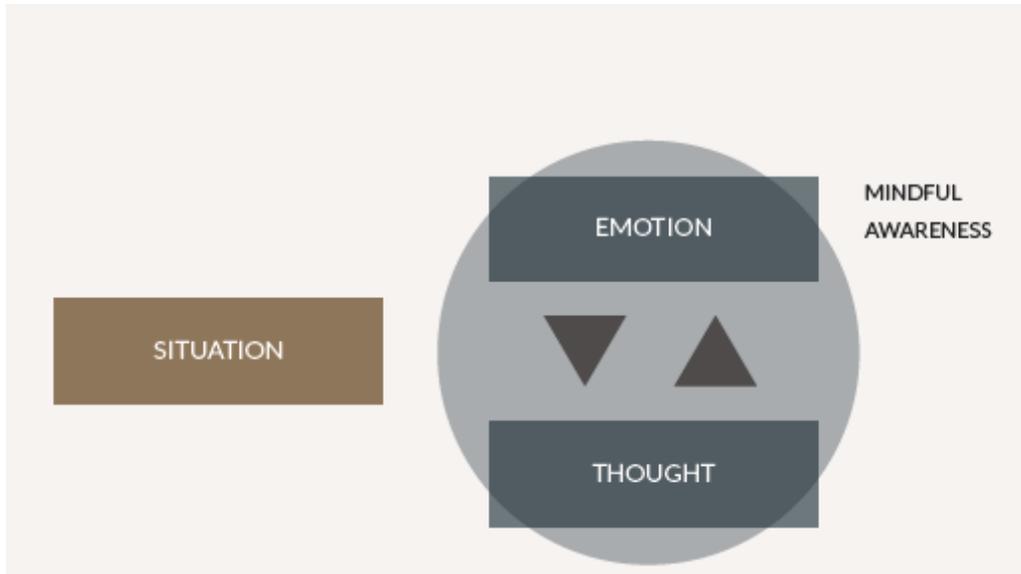
ATTENTION TO THE HERE AND NOW

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 provides the possibility 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. Just pause. For a moment, just focus on your breath. 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 I 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 are taken away by thoughts or feelings again, simply focus your attention on the breath 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 observe and accept what you experience. By turning attention back to the present moment, you create room and insight. Thus, mindfulness can help to become aware of the automatic influence of thoughts on emotions and vice versa. Thoughts and emotions are not changed or modified; it is how you relate to these emotions and thoughts that is altered. Feelings are less guided by

thoughts and you become more like an observer, one who is less guided toward action based on the content of thoughts and feelings.

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, the feeling of the food on your tongue, and try to become aware of the taste, the movement of the fork, 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, etc. Make eating the meal the most important activity. Devote all your attention to it.

INFORMATION: EATING WITH AWARENESS

Eating is a daily habit. It is no wonder that it 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 t.v., email or the content of the conversation. When this happens, we tend to enjoy the food less.

In fact, what we experience while we eat (e.g. the taste, smell and texture of the food) can be regarded as an anchor, comparable to the sensation of focusing on one body part at a time in the body scan practiced earlier. 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 experience of eating.

This exercise can show you that even when your attention should be focused on eating the food in the present, it is quite frequently directed at the future; we take a bite and before we even swallow, our mind is already paying attention to the next bite. This is a pattern that is often present when eating candy, chips or other desirable food.

Mindful eating can contribute to a healthier pattern of eating. Mindfulness reduces emotional eating (Alberts, Thewissen, & Raes, 2012) and can help to contribute to a healthier weight (tapper et al., 2009). Because mindful eating reduces the speed of eating, one is satisfied earlier and eats 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 than the last week, and try to do them with as much undivided attention as possible. Notice how often your attention is automatically drawn away from what you are doing by thoughts, emotions or body sensations.

- 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 | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

TUESDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Routine Activities | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

WEDNESDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Routine Activities | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

THURSDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Routine Activities | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

FRIDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Routine Activities | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

SATURDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Routine Activities | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

SUNDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Routine Activities | | |
| Eating with Awareness | | |

NOTES
