

Mindfulness at Work

letting go of reactivity

Stephen Schettini



WHAT IS REACTIVITY?

You know what it's like when someone ruffles your feathers: your heart jumps, your blood rises, you bristle. This emotion is your nervous system's first contact: the *stimulus*. Without thinking, you either fight or fly. Either way, your *response* is a sequence of behavior, mostly automated.

Sometimes, the sequence plays out with a colleague or family member. Your buttons are pressed and you can't help reacting. Then, you can't help pressing back. It's a dysfunctional dance.

You've promised yourself you won't do it again, but you do. It feels beyond your control.

What's lacking is strategy. This consists of paying attention to those sequences until your behaviour and your motives are clear to you. Then it becomes a *conscious* sequence.

You begin to find opportunities to step into it and make changes.

It takes practice.





INTERNAL REACTIVITY

It doesn't necessarily take another person to press your buttons. You may miss an important opportunity and kick yourself, triggering thoughts of self-doubt or unworthiness. Some perfectly competent people question themselves so much they feel like frauds; sometimes, perfectly good people actually believe they're awful.

Natural mental processes set up reactive habits that play out with a familiarity that feels natural and unchangeable even when it hurts.

Reactive habits acquired in infancy are so automated that they feel *instinctive*; it's hard to believe they're *learned* habits. In fact, they feel like *you*. It's not unusual to feel trapped by who we are, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Since reactive habits are *learned*, they can be *unlearned*.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is nothing new. In fact, it's quite familiar. You used it during childhood to explore yourself, your environment and your options. As your sense of self matured, reactivity set in. One reactive habit afflicting us all these days is a constantly busy mind that never finds time for the present moment.

Mindfulness is the mind's natural antidote to reactivity. It consists of

paying attention to whatever is playing out in the present moment—especially in your body and mind. Mindfulness is awake, non-judgmental and playful. It's simple but surprisingly elusive. That's because we're addicted to *doing* and give little attention to *being*.

Mindfulness becomes an effective mental tool in as little as ten minutes a day. The challenge is to establish an enjoyable practice.



STIMULUS

LETTING GO OF REACTIVITY

RESPONSE

Deciding to let go is a start, but *establishing* it is a process requiring *commitment*. Reactivity kicks in faster than thought, so the first goal of mindfulness is to *widen the gap* between stimulus and response. Then you can reset the usual sequence of events. Where there was reactivity, you now have mind space—*choices*.

Mindfulness first reveals how you hang on to reactive patterns *even after you've decided to stop*. With that insight the process of unlearning actually begins.

Letting go of reactivity is an art. It takes practice. It's also a process of discovery.

As you continue to practice you see that your reactions are *not who you are*; they're just passing mental events. Nothing needs defending. As you shed baggage you gain a sense of personal freedom, and of growth.



THE CYCLE OF REACTIVITY

YASMIN'S STORY

Yasmin was a talented designer at a clothing manufacturer. Her boss valued her greatly, but didn't treat her gently. He ranted whenever the slightest thing went wrong and was always yelling. The sick rate was high; so was employee turnover.

Yasmin was the only one who could shout back with impunity. She maintained her self-respect, but at a cost—the stress was getting to her. Mindfulness taught her that she could establish a private inner space.

At first she imagined a sort of cave that no shouting would reach—but she didn't really think that likely. Yasmin was a highly practical person.

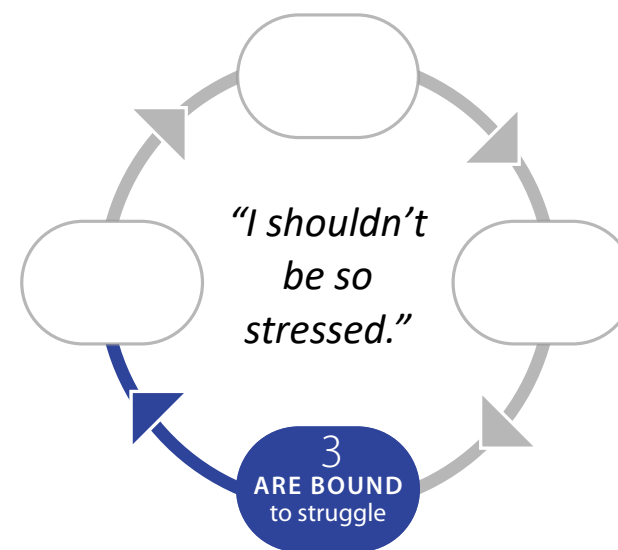
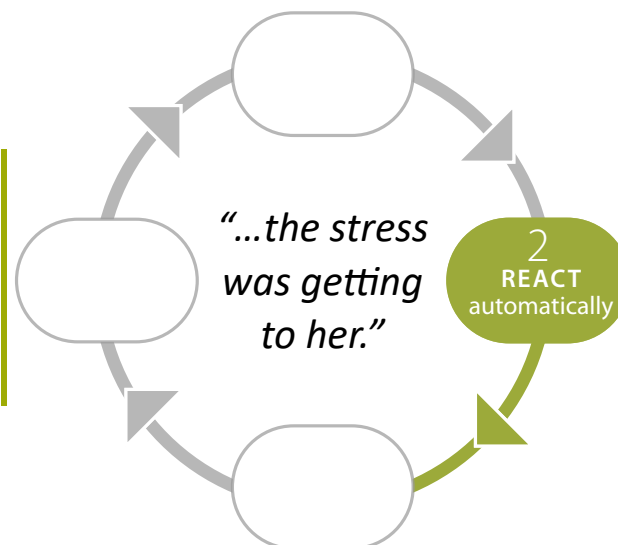
Describing her situation she lamented, "I shouldn't be so stressed. I have to overcome it."

"Don't target stress directly," I said. "Stop, breathe, give yourself some mindspace. Then look again."



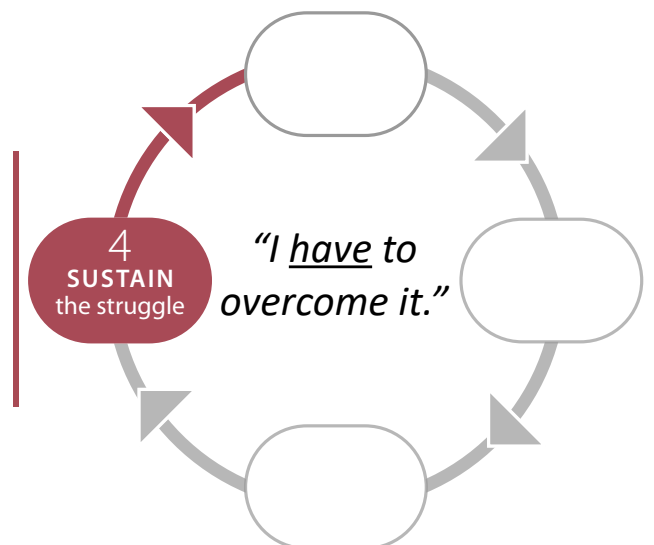
Yasmin's self-respect came at a price. Standing her ground required struggling with her experience.

Her stress response was habitual. Without conscious attention she reacted automatically.



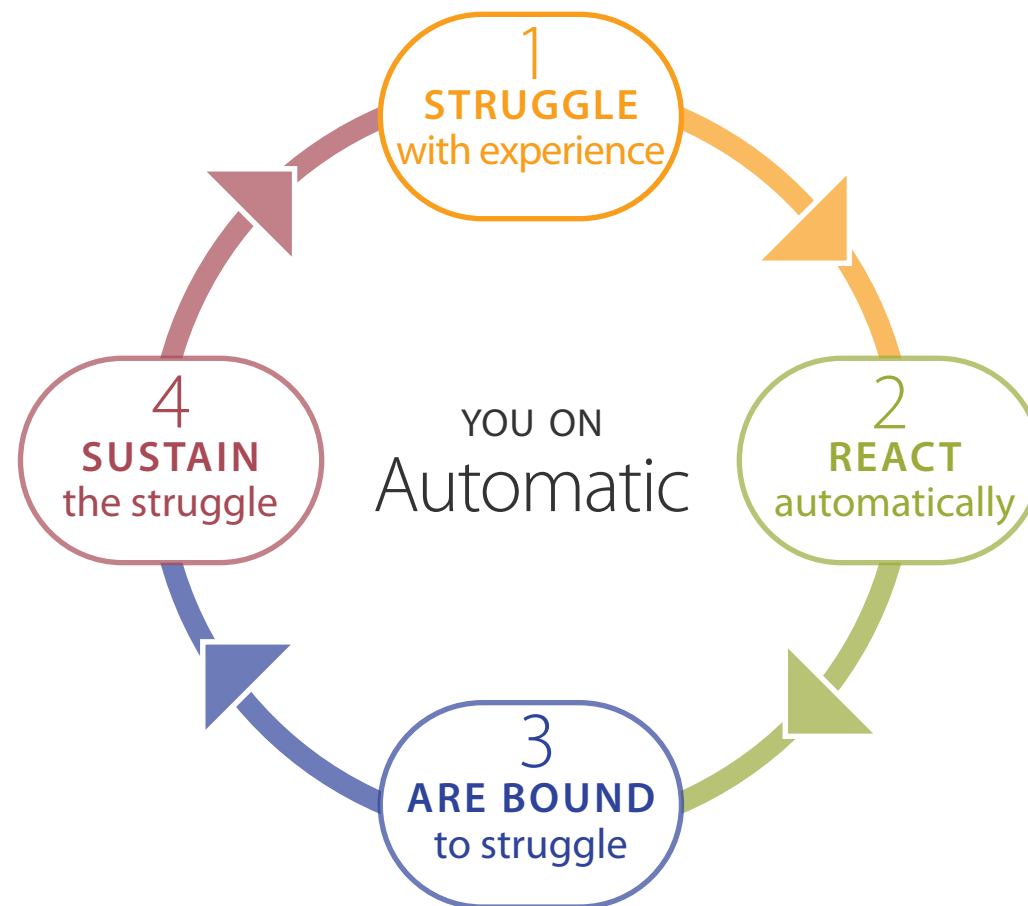
Not understanding why she had no control over her stress, she was bound to struggle.

Struggle identified her situation as something to be fought with and overcome, not let go. She sustained the struggle.



The Cycle of Reactivity

Struggle and stress work together in a self-sustaining feedback loop.



THE ART OF MINDFULNESS

At the next workshop, Yasmin continued: “All week I was trying to figure out what you meant by ‘stop.’ Then he called me in, screaming and yelling about an order that was late, holding up production. He laced into me.”

“I wanted to make him stop, and as usual I was about to shout right back when I understood why I always did that: because I wanted *to shut him up*. At the same instant I realized it would never work; in fact, it just encouraged him. Now I had a choice. Instead of shouting, I stopped. It took just one breath to regain my focus. I was calm. I felt grounded.”

“He shouted a while longer (he looked like a wind-up toy). Then he went quiet and said, ‘Say something!’ He looked confused, even a little scared. ‘You’re right boss.’ I said. ‘The order’s late. I’ll go and see what’s up.’”

“Instead of slamming the door the way I used to, I closed it carefully. Back at my desk the phone was ringing. ‘Is everything all right?’ the boss asked. ‘I mean with you?’”

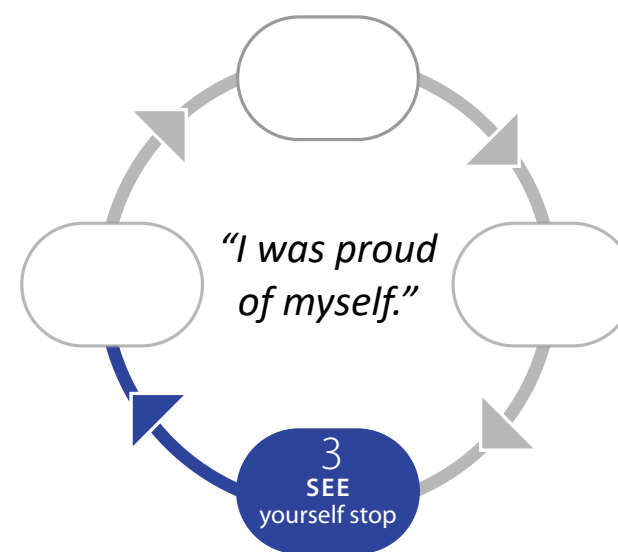
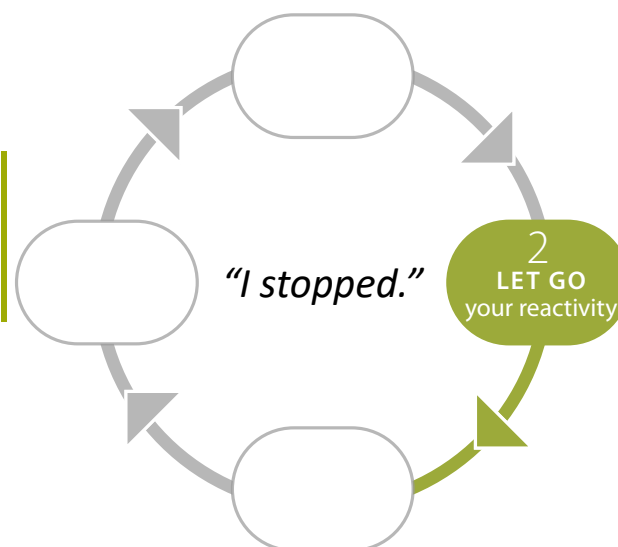
“‘Absolutely.’ I said, and it was so true. I was proud of myself. Since then, he shouted at me a couple more times, but I think he’s given up. He doesn’t look happy about it. I think he misses me shouting back. That dance we had put him in his comfort zone, but without me he couldn’t do it any longer.”

“When I realized how stuck he was in that unprofessional, rude behavior I vowed, ‘I will never give up’ my mindfulness practice. I don’t want to end up like him.”



Yasmin finally understood the experience of fighting with her boss, seeing why she shouted back and at the same time seeing through it.

She saw through her underlying motive & let go of reactivity.



She saw herself stop, recognized its importance and established a positive feedback loop.

Yasmin makes a conscious decision to carry on practicing mindfulness as a lifelong commitment.



The Art of Mindfulness

Bringing attention to the present moment enables you to let go of reactivity and commit to a new way.



After living for eight years as a Buddhist monk, I began teaching mindfulness in 1980 and have spent my entire life delivering these insights in the most practical ways I could find.

In that time I became The Naked Monk, a blogger poking under the covers of belief, as well as a teacher and writer. When I started teaching Mindful Reflection™ in 2003, it was by separating the mind exercises of Buddhism from its religious container, and by using the insights and language of science to make them understandable.

Today, my mission is to teach mindfulness in today's fast-paced life as a way to fulfilment and peace of mind.

To learn more about how I work with organisations or individuals, contact me at the coordinates below.

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