



## 2. WHAT IF I THOUGHT ABOUT IT DIFFERENTLY...

### Specific objectives of the workshop

At the end of the workshop, the student will be able to:

- Identify their thoughts and their impact using the cognitive-behavioural model;
- Identify the main negative thoughts that emerge when faced with an anxiety-provoking situation;
- Understand the impact of their thoughts on their sensations and emotions;
- Reformulate negative thoughts into more helpful ones;

### How the workshop works

Welcome the students and present the workshop objectives and how it will work.

#### A. Mindful listening (10 min)

1. Before beginning this activity, make sure to read the complementary sheet on mindfulness at the end of this workshop.
2. Begin the activity by asking the students: "What do you think mindfulness is?" Complete using the information on the complementary sheet.
3. Suggest that the students try a mindfulness exercise. Ask them to find a place where they can sit comfortably with their eyes closed without being disturbed. They can sit on the floor or on a chair, whichever they prefer. Ask them to close their eyes if they want to. Ask them to pause for a minute and pay attention to the little things they overlook when they're operating on autopilot, when they're stressed, or when they're on their devices, for example.
4. Now, ask them to take a few deep breaths to settle down and focus their attention on the air flowing in and out of their body.



Centre RBC  
d'expertise universitaire  
en santé mentale



Université de  
Sherbrooke



Centre intégré  
de santé et de  
services sociaux de  
la Montérégie-Centre

Québec



Avec le financement de

Agence de la santé  
publique du Canada

Public Health  
Agency of Canada

February 2023

5. After the students have taken a few breaths, and once they've anchored themselves to their breathing, ask them to turn their attention to the sounds they hear. Start playing this piece of music: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toJf4\\_dvwSQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toJf4_dvwSQ) (Tiersen, 2001).
6. Then ask them what they heard (the number of instruments, the different sounds, their intensity, etc.). Ask them how they feel after this exercise. Explain that they can use this exercise in their daily lives to calm down. To do this, suggest that they focus on music or sounds that they find soothing.
7. Now, tell them you will spend a few minutes together in silence. Before beginning, ask them to pay attention to the silence and to all the noises they hear in the quiet. Ask them to pay attention to the noises in the room, the sound of their breathing, the noises in the background, etc. Also tell them that it's perfectly normal for their thoughts to drift or their mind to wander. Mindfulness helps us realize that our thoughts tend to scatter and that our mind is naturally restless. With practice, it becomes easier to refocus on the present moment. Don't feel bad if your thoughts are all over the place; you're not failing at mindfulness! It's completely normal. As soon as you become aware of it, simply focus your mind on the next sound you hear.
8. You can also mention that they shouldn't classify sounds as pleasant or unpleasant, but simply listen to them.
9. Once you're done explaining, spend a few minutes in silence, letting the students focus on the sounds around them. Then, gently lead them into the next part of the activity.
10. Tell the students they can also do this activity when walking in the woods, in a pet store, at the beach, or in an especially stimulating or relaxing sound environment.
11. You can finish the mindful listening activity by pointing out that when they are anxious, when their thoughts are racing, when they are worrying about something, it can help to remember to stay focused on the *here and now*. This mindful listening activity will help the students to focus on the little details and stay in the moment, by being more attentive to their surroundings.
12. Remind the students that they will get the most out of mindfulness if they practise it in their daily lives. There are several apps out there to help them master the practice. Suggest they try a few and tell them that many of them are free.
  - Headspace (<https://www.headspace.com>)
  - Petit Bambou (<https://www.petitbambou.com/en/>)

## B. The week in review (10 min)

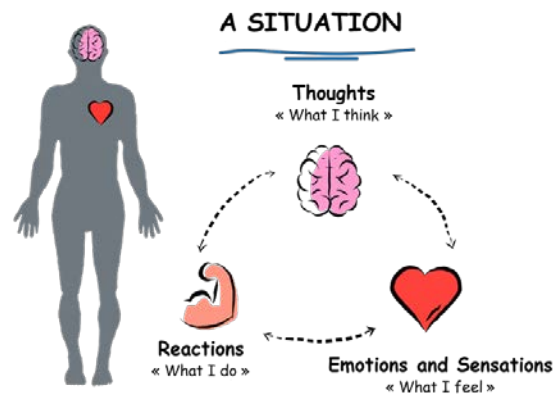
1. Now, ask the students how their week went. Ask them: How did you feel in general? Did you step outside of your comfort zone? If so, in which situations? If not, why? Did you notice any situations that you tend to avoid?



2. If you want to go into more detail, you can ask the following questions:
  - Did you learn anything new about yourself?
  - Did you notice anything different about the way you perceive or react to certain situations?
  - Did you learn anything about your comfort zone and your personal objective?

### C. What's going on inside me: My thoughts (10 min)

1. Explain that they can use the diagram of the cognitive-behavioural approach, found in their *Handy student guide*, to better understand what is going on inside them. This approach helps them become aware that their thoughts have an influence on their emotions, their sensations, and ultimately, their behaviours in a given situation. Physical sensations also feed emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. All these elements interact with each other (Beck, 2011).



2. Give the following example: You're asleep in your bed. You hear a noise. You think to yourself: "It's a robber!" What's going on inside your body (sensations)? What are you feeling (emotions)? What do you do (reactions)?
3. Repeat the scenario but change the students' interpretation of the noise. You're asleep in your bed. You hear a noise. You think to yourself: "Oh, no! The cat knocked something over again!" What's going on inside your body (sensations)? What are you feeling (emotions)? What do you do (reactions)?
4. Explain that the way they interpret the situation (their thoughts) will completely change their emotions and sensations and their reaction to the situation (their behaviours). And yet, it's basically the same situation. Explain that this mechanism is constantly "on" and that to control their stress or anxiety, they need to learn how to recognize the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that are triggered by the stressful situation; sometimes, they also need to learn to see things differently.

## D. Are my thoughts helpful? (25 min)

1. Ask the students to write down on a piece of paper a real-life or anticipated situation that's causing them anxiety; reassure them they will remain anonymous. They can use a real-life situation. They should also write down the thoughts, sensations, and emotions associated with the situation. During this time, reproduce the following table on the board. Randomly choose a situation and read it out loud. Write it in the first column of the table.

Description of the situation	Thoughts	Emotions and sensations	Reformulating thoughts into realistic, helpful, positive ones	Emotions and sensations
"Teamwork... I don't know anyone"	"No one will want to be my partner"	"Fear, shame, pounding heart"	"Maybe there's someone else who's just as shy as me, and they'd be happy if I suggested we team up"	"Courage, stand up straight"

2. Ask the students what they would think if they were in this situation. This question can bring out different reactions to the same situation. Write them down in the right-hand column and ask the students to do the same in their *Handy student guide*.
3. Go back to the first unhelpful thought listed. Ask the students to identify the physical sensations they'd feel if they thought about the situation this way; then ask them to draw these sensations on the figure of the human body in their *Handy student guide*. Then ask them to write the physical sensations and emotions they'd feel in the correct column in their table.
4. Now, ask the students the following list of questions, which are also in their *Handy student guide*. These questions can help to transform their unhelpful thoughts into helpful ones. Ask the students to choose the three questions that resonate most with them and to write them down in their *Handy student guide*. They can rewrite them in their own words.

### List of questions:

- Am I certain of what I think? What makes me perceive the situation that way?
- Am I able to give less importance to what others will think?
- Am I too quick to conclude that something is wrong?
- Is it realistic to expect perfection in everything I do?
- What is the worst thing that can happen? What could I do to prepare for it? And if the worst did happen, would it be so bad?
- How much will it affect my life? And a year from now, will I remember it?
- Would there be another way to look at the situation? Is there anything positive? What

can I learn from this situation?

- What do I have power over in this situation? How do I get power?
- What similar situation have I experienced in the past that ended well? What strategies did I use?

5. Ask the students to use the three questions they chose from the list to transform the thought written on the board into a more helpful, realistic, or positive one. Once the students have finished, ask them to share their answers (new helpful thought) and write them down in the table. Once you're done, ask them to close their eyes and notice how they are feeling (emotions and sensations) about this new way of interpreting the situation.
6. Depending how much time you have, you can repeat the exercise using one or more of the other situations listed by the students.
7. Wrap up the activity by emphasizing that our thoughts influence our emotions. Remind the students that one of the objectives of the program is to become aware of the unhelpful thoughts that paralyze or discourage us—and try to challenge them.

### E. This week's challenge (5 min)

1. Explain that this week's challenge (also in their *Handy student guide*) is to try to use one of the questions from the workshop to reformulate an unhelpful thought into a helpful one. Ask the students to pay attention to how they feel when they reformulate their thoughts.

Tell the students that they will need pencil for the next workshop.



## Complementary sheet

### What is mindfulness and how does it work?

Mindfulness is paying close attention to your sensations, thoughts, or emotions, without labelling them as good or bad, wanted, or unwanted. In other words, we don't judge them, we simply observe them. Mindfulness allows us to get in touch with what's going on inside us and around us; over time, it helps us to be less critical. In general, we tend to regularly criticize and judge our environment, our family, and friends, and ourselves (Baer, 2003; Broderick and Metz, 2011).

Mindfulness can be practised formally, using meditations such as body scanning, or informally, through activities such as mindful walking. There are different types of informal meditation or activities that allow you to tap into the different spheres of mindfulness (senses, emotions, perceptions, presence, etc.) (Kaiser Greenland, 2016).

Mindfulness, whether practised formally or informally, is a way to be in the present moment, to better understand what's going on inside you, and to find an anchor point, which is often your breathing. It can be a powerful tool for regulating stress (Holzel *et al.*, 2011). The important thing about mindfulness is to choose methods that you enjoy, that you're comfortable with, and that feel good.

During the workshops, the students will have the opportunity to experiment with the many forms of mindfulness, after which they can choose the ones best suited to their personal journey.

Mindfulness can have the following benefits (Keng *et al.*, 2011):

- Improve communication;
- Develop and master the senses;
- Manage stress and emotions;
- Calm the mind to become more open to learning;
- Maintain quality relationships with oneself, others, and the environment.

### Are there any precautions when it comes to mindfulness?

As with any activity, some people may love it and others may hate it. Some students may embrace it quickly and others, much later in life or never. Research shows that mindfulness can have beneficial effects in most people (Felver *et al.*, 2016; Zenner *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, other people may find it unpleasant, uncomfortable, painful, even harmful (Dobkin *et al.*, 2012). There can be risks associated with the intensity of the activity, the person's vulnerability, or the way the information is conveyed. Some of your students' risk experiencing negative effects. Unfortunately, the literature doesn't let us clearly identify which students are most at risk. However, you can take some precautions. If possible, find out which students are most sensitive, emotionally, and cognitively. And pay attention to the students' body language as you lead the activity:



- Let the students know that they may feel uncomfortable. This is usually temporary and doesn't mean that mindfulness isn't right for them;
- Be prepared (you or another facilitator) to provide support to students who express discomfort or simply need to talk;
- Let the students know they can stop if they start to feel uncomfortable or uneasy. At this point, you can suggest that they refocus their attention on something else, doodle, or even read;
- Mindfulness is a lifestyle that not everyone has to follow. It's completely voluntary and can't be forced;
- Activities that involve focusing on their breathing may be uncomfortable for some students with anxiety or depression. If the students still want to learn about mindfulness or participate in the activity, they can instead focus on their heartbeat, or sounds or objects in the classroom. Gradually, they may be able to shift their focus back to their body and breathing;
- Let the students know that mindfulness leads to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. They may experience feelings of calm, relaxation, happiness, and well-being, just as they may feel physical discomfort, sadness, agitation, and sleepiness; these are all perfectly normal;
- Remind the students that they are the best judges of what's good and not good for them. They are responsible for their own well-being—in the present moment and in the long term.

In short, your role as facilitator includes watching for the students' reactions and being aware that these can be positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the students' personalities, tolerance, and receptiveness. These reactions are all a normal part of a mindfulness practice.

