

Working with Symptoms

Gathering Information through Curiosity

This handout provides one way of working with symptoms. It suggests how to develop curiosity and gather information in a nonjudging way as a means of beginning a conversation between mind and body. When we have symptoms, it suggests that there are parts of ourselves that may have been out of touch for a long time.

Gathering information and observing our experience in the present moment engages parts of our brains different from those that stimulate symptoms or reactions to stress. Strengthening this part of our brains helps grow in the resources and the capacity for the nervous system to “self-regulate” (regulate itself) more effectively and that is less related to symptoms.

Gathering Information

While symptoms are frequently associated with a complex and challenging set of factors, finding ways to become curious about them can help begin to unravel some of the clues to their existence and to their ‘personality styles’. Information gathering is a little bit like going to a strange land and learning about its foods, language, and peoples. Curiosity enables us to more fully participate, to communicate and get our needs met, and to potentially forge new alliances.

Whatever context we use, it is often helpful to find ways to gather information about these aspects of ourselves in gentle, nonjudging ways. This information, in turn, fosters a dialogue between parts of ourselves, such as those that no longer want to have these symptoms and those that seem to demand it. Gathering information is a tool that helps us learn how to meet the needs of these different aspects of ourselves, often with new and more effective strategies. Getting to know ourselves is an interesting process that can help us learn to be less uncomfortable with our symptoms, less fearful or blaming, and often more calm and in control.

A Perspective about the Origins and Presence of Symptoms

- A symptom may be *the best or only* way our bodies know how to cope with an overwhelming experience, thought, or emotion, even though we may not be aware of it in the moment
- Imagine the *possibility* that a symptom represents an intelligent strategy, even if maladaptive or distressing. It’s absolutely okay (and normal) to feel angry, frustrated, hopeless etc about one’s symptom(s) or illness. Curiosity helps us to seek and hear these messages.
- A symptom may represent a defense or survival mechanism.
- Defense strategies may have been very useful in the past and may have enabled us to survive during overwhelming and challenging circumstances until now. A symptom may not immediately look or feel like a defense strategy, and this can be explored over time.
- Symptoms may change once our bodies learn other strategies for coping with certain situations, thoughts, emotions, or events
- Consider thinking of a symptom as a lost and terrified child: one who acts defiant, demanding, or “spoiled” because he is afraid and feels alone; a child that needs a parent very badly, yet doesn’t trust anyone to show up or be able to help because she has felt alone for a long time.; or think of a symptom as you would if it were a best friend that is grieving or despairing. It is often easier to feel gentle and loving towards someone else than towards ourselves.

I. Create an Atmosphere from which to find Curiosity about Symptoms

Consider this an experiment, during which time anything that happens (including difficulty being curious) provides you with information

1. Create a safe place (in your imagination, in your schedule, in your home and day)
2. Find something pleasurable as an anchor to come back to after checking in with your symptoms (a sensation in your body, a photo, a memory, an object to hold or touch, your journal, a friend, ...).
3. Take a few moments, minutes, or hour... to study or be with your symptoms and where you will have time to alternate (oscillate) from an experience of pleasure, to symptoms, and back to pleasure. Explore symptoms utilizing a short enough time frame that enables you to be as curious as possible, even if this is only for 30 seconds
4. Always start and end with the pleasurable experience.
5. In selecting a symptom, starting with one that is of low intensity. This makes it easier to experiment with being curious. Some of our loudest, strongest symptoms (ie: fatigue in chronic fatigue, the most painful area of the body in chronic pain, etc) are often the hardest ones to be with. So, leave them for later when you've become more skilled at this process.

II. Explore your Symptoms: Questions that Foster Information Gathering

You may have and want to use your own questions

Use these as guidelines and feel free to discard or avoid any of them

- ❑ How does your body react to stress and what is stressful for you?
- ❑ Can you *feel* the symptom as a physical sensation? If so, what do you notice when you pay attention to it or think of it (sensations in the body; images, sounds, textures, colors...; thoughts, emotions...feelings...). Focusing on a physical sensation can be helpful in counteracting the pull of strong emotions such as fear, or anger, and can access a different, more resourced part of the brain.
- ❑ If you can't feel the symptom: (High blood pressure, for example, may be difficult to feel, as can a global symptom such as being overweight), notice that this may be unknown territory and see what shows up over the next few moments, days, or weeks to inform you about how this symptom feels and lives in your experience (Do you experience worry about this symptom? Tension? Avoidance? ...).
- ❑ If you listen to your symptom right now, what would it like (you) to do? There may be opposing impulses or it may not be clear. Consider trying out various options that come up: such as resting, taking a nap, or doing a certain activity at a particular pace or with a certain quality. What's it like to indulge and respond to the symptoms' 'request(s)'?
- ❑ What is it like to have the symptom(s)?
 - What comes up as you think about or experience a particular symptom?
 - Consider writing down the thoughts or emotions (including concerns, fears, or anxieties; relief, dependencies, needs...) as they come up so as to acknowledge their existence; go back to the experience of pleasure anytime you find your curiosity waning. Pleasure is a resource, like a rock that gives you stability.

- ❑ What event(s), thought(s), emotion(s) trigger or intensify your symptoms? It may be hard to tell, and asking the questions will invite answers over time.
- ❑ How might your symptom(s) be a way of survival / defense?
- ❑ Does your body seem to overreact to certain types of events?
 - excitement, eating certain foods, exercise
 - certain relationships or people or interactions, times of day...
- ❑ Does your symptom ever seem to help you to unconsciously avoid something (such as a sense of threat or danger, stressful experience, a lack of safety, etc)?
 - What types of sensations (Tension? Twisting? Stillness? Movement? Tingling? Numbness? etc...) does this symptom employ? In what order?
 - How can you explore what it's like to USE the symptom, on purpose, to avoid what needs to be avoided for now?
 - What is it that your system needs to avoid for now (exercise? A particular relationship?)? Can you honor your body's message and avoid this activity, event, person, or place? If you can't avoid it, explore the craving or impulse behind the need for avoidance & see how you can support its need in other ways.
 - What other experiences and activities can help you consciously avoid for now? Do you have a "repertoire" of behaviors, thoughts, emotions, activities you can choose from to avoid? (Choice is a good thing)