

Dealing with the Stories that Make Us Suffer

Carl Fooks · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

A common question I get goes something along these lines: “A friend has done something that has upset me. I feel betrayed. I thought I could trust them. I’m suffering. How can I stop?” The person varies, what happens varies, the feeling varies, but it all boils down to the same archetypal cause: something happens that we want to be different. Sue got a pay rise but I didn’t! Jim cheated on me! Billy stole from me! Mary doesn’t like me. Tara has asked me not to make a cake for the party; I’m convinced nobody likes my cakes! Etc. When things like this happen, a big part of our suffering comes from the stories we tell ourselves about these events. The stories might be accurate and justified, but often they’re distorted and hypercritical, and we believe them as if they are true. We think we’re useless, unloveable, gullible, unlikeable, talentless chumps! The instructions for practice boil down to watching whatever arises within the field of awareness in a way that does not control, manipulate, judge, question, or interfere in any way whatsoever. How does this help in daily life, though? When something like this assails us, how do we apply the practice? One thing we can do is use mindfulness to delve into what’s happening to discover what’s really disturbing us. On the cushion, we investigate our experience: what is this? The same is true off the cushion. We delve into the experience: what am I actually experiencing here? What’s troubling me? On the cushion, we do this non-discursively, we simply watch and wait for it to show us what it has to tell us, but off the cushion it often first needs a bit more interactive analysis. We delve deeper and deeper asking what’s the matter, what’s bothering me, what am I struggling with? Get an answer, test it, and ask again. Eventually we find something fundamental, possibly an unloved, unappreciated, betrayed little mini-me, sitting wounded in the corner of our minds, wailing at the terrible things “that nasty person has done to me”. It is there that we apply the practice. We simply watch that wounded feeling, allowing it to be there without any interference whatsoever, noting gently: “wounded wounded”. I wrote about this approach in last October’s Newsbyte if you would like to read more. Sometimes though an alternative approach is needed. Perhaps the pain is too much and we have to first get ourselves into a better place before we can investigate. When something like this happens to me, I undermine the certainty I feel in what I believe has happened. If somebody’s said something to me that makes me feel terrible, I think of how I “know” that it’s true, and then think of alternatives that could be true instead. I come up with two or three alternatives that are genuine possibilities, and I convince myself that I can never know which one of the different possibilities are actually true. If I asked the “perpetrator”, they may tell me a lie so as not to offend me. Or they may tell me the truth. Unless I could actually get inside their mind, I have no way of telling. Even lie-detector tests are fallible. So, I just can’t know. Right there, in that realisation, is freedom. The moment you see that any of them could be true, the attachment to one of them simply does not make any sense, and the mind is much less inclined to cling to it. Seeing this, we should soak ourselves in the

realisation that clinging to an idea, a view, leads to suffering, while letting go of it leads to release and relief. When this becomes a habitual pattern of the mind, it starts doing it with everything. Is my view of anything more right or wrong than anyone else's? No! Of course not! There are just views. Seeing this, we unpick our belief in the stories the mind tells us, slowly liberating ourselves from our inner-critic, and inching our way towards freedom.

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