

Final Thoughts



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Julie is a compassion fatigue specialist who brings a unique perspective and approach to support the sustained energy and passion of animal workers. Her company, Rekindle LLC, offers on-site compassion fatigue training to veterinary hospitals, animal shelters, and other animal organizations.

Julie has more than 20 years of experience within the veterinary field and with leading organizations. She has developed and executed training, workshops, and 1:1 coaching for major companies in the animal health industry. She obtained her certification as a compassion fatigue specialist through the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology and has also completed training from The Figley Institute and Traumatology Institute. Julie's clients also gain from her experience as a certified health and wellness coach and corporate wellness specialist.

What Monkeys Can Teach Us: Letting Go

There's an ancient parable about how hunters used to trap monkeys.

Coconuts were hollowed out, filled with bananas or other monkey delicacies, and then tied to a tree. A hole big enough for a monkey's hand was cut in each coconut. The monkeys would come and reach into the coconuts for the food, but the holes were crafted such that although a flexible hand could fit in, a fist could not be pulled out. By holding on to the food, the monkeys essentially became trapped—trapped by their attachment and clinging to the food. All they had to do was *let go* to free themselves, but their minds trapped them.

When we cling or become attached to an idea, a feeling, or a desired outcome, we too become trapped by our minds.

Recently, I conducted a compassion fatigue workshop in a large veterinary practice. At the end of the workshop, a veterinary technician named Katie (not her real name) confided in me that it was an "aha" moment for her. "I try to take away all the pain from my patients and the clients and it's killing me," she said. "I just realized how badly I need to *let go* and how it's not my pain to take on." She hugged me and went on to tell me how she could feel so much weight being lifted from her with that single realization.

Letting Go with the Four Noble Truths

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha identified how suffering comes from patterns of thinking and behaving. These insights are referred to as The Four Noble Truths.

The first noble truth: In life, there is suffering because of the impermanent nature of things.

While we all understand on some level that things are always changing and death is inescapable, we still vehemently resist change in all forms. To end suffering caused by uncontrollable change, we need to accept the change. Resistance is futile.

The second noble truth: Suffering is caused by attachments and expectations, by grasping and clinging.

Just like the monkeys and their refusal to let go of the coconuts, we pay a hefty price for our attachments.

The third noble truth: It's possible to end suffering by giving up attachments (clinging) and expectations (grasping).

In my experience, and in my workshops, practicing and embodying the concept from mindfulness of *being with what is* has provided me and so many others with not only relief from suffering but also implicit freedom.

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We tend to resist whatever is happening that we don't like. As long as life is going the way we like, we're fine. But the minute a coworker is curt with us, or a patient dies unexpectedly, or our car breaks down, we find ourselves expending a ton of energy to push away what we don't like or trying to change the unchangeable. What *being with what is* offers is to stop fighting with reality. The freedom results from acceptance. That does not mean we have to like it, but we do have to accept it.

The fourth noble truth: The way to end suffering from clinging and grasping is through balance and living in the present.

Here is where we get the opportunity to practice over and over again, every day! In my life, I try to constantly give myself the chance to acknowledge my thoughts and emotions and, with that, find balance. By being "present," or self-aware, I allow myself to feel what I'm feeling and lean in rather than pull away, resist, or cling. I'm not perfect, but I don't try to be. I treat myself the way I would treat a good friend, reminding myself to let go of the *what-ifs* and the *if-onlys* and see where I am right now and what it's like. Am I happy? Yes. Savor it! Am I suffering? Yes. Why? Let it go.

Where in your life are you holding on, attached, or clinging to a thought or feeling that is trapping you? Is it an unrealistic expectation of yourself, or anger or resentment against a client or coworker? Wherever it is, see if you can find the self-compassion and kindness that you so easily give to others and gift it to yourself.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the renowned "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction" program, reminds us that our breath teaches us this very lesson of letting go. When we take in a breath, we then have to let it go, otherwise there is no room for the next breath.¹ Breathing is a constant rhythm of taking in (receiving) and letting go.

And this rhythm we practice over and over again, every single day. ■

Reference

1. Kabat-Zinn J. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Hachette Books; 2005.