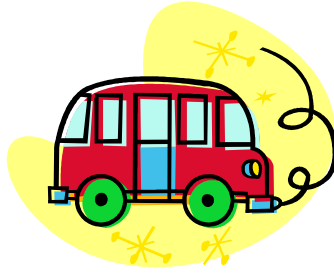


the bus driver metaphor



It can be useful in a whole series of ways to think of ourselves as bus drivers! We're driving the bus of our life. We have a whole bunch of often unruly passengers in the back. The passengers are our thoughts and feelings. At times they can be a nuisance. Sometimes they shout out stuff like "You're a useless driver", or "You're going in the wrong direction", or "There's too much racket in the back here. You should stop and come to deal with it", or a whole series of other potentially distressing/distracting feelings and mind noise. There are several very useful lessons that be taken from this metaphor (and the bus driver image is usually easy to remember).

- 1. *the importance of values:*** It's hugely important for our health and wellbeing that we mostly focus on driving the bus in the right direction. The "right direction" is determined by our values, by what truly matters to us. Our values are the compass bearing which we need to steer by (the "Respected figures" exercise may help here). Values are things like "I want to live with courage and kindness", or "I want to look after my health", or "I want to prioritise those I love", or "I want to develop my interests and talents as far as I can". As the Hasidic rabbi, Susya said "When I get to heaven, God will not ask 'Why were you not Moses?'. He will ask 'Why were you not Susya? Why did you not become what only you could become?'"
- 2. *distinguishing values and goals:*** It's often helpful to distinguish values and goals. Values are likely to be compass bearings we use to steer by for many decades. We don't typically prioritise those we love for a while, or look after our health for a while, and then get to a place where we've arrived and can stop doing it. Our current goals however we may well reach. So we might want to arrange a surprise birthday party for our partner or train to run a marathon or target other goals that are an expression of our values. Hopefully we'll achieve these goals and then we'll want to make fresh ones ("Goals for roles" exercises can help here). It's like travelling on a particular compass bearing (values) and seeing that some way ahead in this direction is a landmark (goal) – maybe a tree or a hill – that we can steer towards for a while. The landmark is the goal we head for as we follow our values compass. When we reach it, we look ahead on our compass bearing for the next landmark to steer towards. Values are the way that we walk, the direction. Goals are checkpoints on the journey.
- 3. *values are not about the future, they're about now, today:*** This way of distinguishing ongoing values from checkpoint goals, leads to another realization. We live or don't live our values right now, today. Values (unlike goals) are not some destination that we're travelling towards. Values are the way that we are travelling, the way we make our journey. If my key values are to live with determination and courage, or with love and kindness – this is the direction, the way I want to travel. It's like saying "I've decided to travel North-West. This is the compass bearing I'm going to follow." I can start to follow the compass of my values right now. If I'm heading North-West right now, then I'm doing it. It's not something I have to wait for or work towards. It's now. As the Christian mystic Angelus Silesius put it (possibly rather over-bluntly) "In good time we shall see God and his light' you say. Fool, you shall never see what you not see today!" While the founder of Soto Zen, Dogen, said "If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?" and the poet T. S. Eliot wrote "And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

[Cont.]

4. **self-definition by values not by external appearance:** Fascinatingly there's plenty of evidence that living a life rich in autonomy, meaning and values promotes resilience in many different situations. For example, this has been found for people facing chronic pain, cancer & even everyday life stresses – while living like this nourishes our overall wellbeing too.
5. **mindfulness and dealing with unruly "bus passengers":** As I commented earlier, we're driving the bus of our life. A great first stress- and self-management strategy is to repeatedly remind ourselves to re-focus on our values and associated goals. Unfortunately however human beings find that some of their bus passengers are unruly and troublesome. These disruptive passengers can usefully be classified into three types – Mr/Ms Catastrophizer (who constantly imagines the worst), Mr/Ms Ruminator/Worrier (who 'broods' extensively about the past and worries endlessly about the future), and Mr/Ms Self-Blamer (who self-attacks without kindness or encouragement). Many research studies show how these thinking styles are strongly associated with poor outcomes. A second major coping skill is mindfulness. This involves simply letting the difficult passengers shout, while one shifts one's attention to value & goal-selected tasks. As the problem passengers realise that they're not running the show any more, they tend to quieten, but – whether they're noisy or silent it doesn't matter – our focus repeatedly returns to our value-chosen activities. Our job is to just drive the bus!
6. **stepping back & reappraising is often helpful too:** This is an old-fashioned bus with a bus conductor, who is the bus driver's friend & support. The conductor represents a third key coping skill – reappraisal. This is the process of stepping back psychologically and seeing our situation from a cooler, more distanced perspective. One way of doing this is to imagine that the challenges we face apply not to us, but to someone we don't know, but who is a bit like us, on the other side of the world. What advice would we give them? It's very likely to be a more helpful viewpoint than the one we can too easily slip into when we become immersed in our problems. See the "*Getting a better perspective*" handout for more on this.
7. **sometimes it's helpful to listen to a "bus passenger":** Although the best strategy is usually to simply let the disruptive passengers shout while we get on with "mindfully" driving the bus in the direction of our values, sometimes it's useful to listen and respond to a "paying passenger" who is interested in getting to the destination the bus is heading for. When we face challenges, one of the more useful passengers is the one who asks "*What can be learned from this experience?*" and "*Is there any way in which going through all this could in some sense be helpful?*" Similarly, repeated emotional reactions that are due to traumatic experiences may well benefit from specific trauma processing. The handout "*The bus driver is warm-blooded: integrating mindfulness & emotion*" goes into all this more fully.
8. **at times "pure driving" is useful & joyful:** Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi in his book "*Flow*" alerted people to the effectiveness & joy that can emerge from becoming deeply focused on specific challenging activities. This is one of the reasons that games are so popular. Our sense of self largely evaporates as we deeply attend to the present moment. This is usually easier with obvious challenges, but wonderful too if we can learn to be mindful and savouring of simple everyday experiences & tasks. We know as well that with the big picture of what helps our lives flourish, deep engagement is likely to nourish wellbeing powerfully and helpfully.

It can often be useful, as a reminder, to think of the bus driver metaphor when we're trying to get on with the busy-ness of every day life while struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. These ideas are adapted from Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) and other research findings. Below are details of two interesting ACT self-help books.

Harris, R. "*The happiness trap.*" London: Robinson, 2007.

Hayes, S. & Smith, S. "*Get out of your mind & into your life.*" Oakland: New Harbinger, 2005.
