

Driven to distraction: Why be mindful in this unmindful world?

Craig Hassed

What's the big deal about the present moment?

When we reflect on our most important formative experiences in life — and they do not come along every day — we might have noticed that they have something in common. They tend to be moments of feeling most fully present, aware and intensely alive. What tends to follow from that is also rather interesting and important. They are the moments where we feel connected to ourselves and the world around us, that we experience beauty, discover things about ourselves, and learn life's most important lessons.

Living in the present moment is another way of saying 'being mindful'. Mindfulness is getting a lot of airtime these days, but for something that appears to be flavour of the month it is useful to remind ourselves that it has a very long pedigree. Wise sages have been speaking about it for thousands of years.

Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future,
concentrate the mind on the present moment.

Buddha

It is easy to think that the Buddhists created 'mindfulness' but there is nothing particularly eastern or western about it — it is universal. Plato and his teacher Socrates are the archetypal wise philosophers of ancient Greece. Plato in his book, *Timaeus*, writes

that ‘time is a moving picture of eternity’. There is the world in a state of constant change, forever coming and going, and then there is something in us that is ever-present, still and just watching. Eternity, in the way we usually think about it, is a really, really, really long time, but Boethius, a Plato enthusiast, some centuries later suggests that eternity is right here, right now when he writes:

... for it is one thing to progress like the world ...
 through everlasting life, and another thing to have
 embraced the whole of everlasting life in one simulta-
 neous present.

Boethius; *Consolation*, V.VI

That tends to open up our idea of what it means to be in the present moment. It is big!

Important lessons

It is one thing to say that the moments when we are most mindful are the ones where we feel most connected, or learn something important, but it is another thing to have a sense of what is meant by that. The editors of *Life Surfing*, *Life Dancing* requested that authors write from both personal and professional perspectives, so perhaps it will make more sense if I illustrate with a few examples from my own life.

The first example relates to worry and anxiety. We all know what it feels like, although as individuals we may get anxious about different things. I used to get anxious about competition, particularly when competing in individual sports. In my mid-teens I used to do quite a lot of competitive swimming, and in the weeks leading up to an important swimming meet I would often feel anxious — the heart thumping, stomach slightly queasy, mind preoccupied and so on. One Saturday morning I was home by myself and the mind started to drift to the upcoming event. Pretty soon I was not feeling so good. But all of a sudden as I was sitting there I had a moment of standing back and seeing what was going on in my own head. In my imagination there was an imaginary me,

standing on the imaginary starting blocks, in front of an imaginary crowd, waiting for the imaginary starter's gun to go off, and hitting the imaginary cold water of Melbourne's old Olympic pool, and imagining myself swimming flat out. What was a game changer, however, was that all of a sudden I realised that up to this moment I had been taking my imagination to be real, and reality — the comfortable chair I was sitting on, the sun coming through the windows, and the birds singing in the trees — had been almost totally blotted out. In reality I was in a totally stress-free environment, but in my mind I was in a dream world without realising it. Then, spontaneously, a series of questions came to mind. I wondered how much of my anxiety, worry, depression and fear was because I lived much of my life unconsciously in this imaginary world? I wondered how vulnerable it left me when I was not able to distinguish imagination from reality because I was not paying attention? I wondered if the present moment was actually a far safer place than I had realised? I wondered if I was 'asleep' for nearly all of my life and whether I needed to wake up? I had what I would now call a 'mindful moment' but it was not as if I was all of a sudden enlightened and then lived happily ever after. What this experience did do was to open me up to possibilities for knowing myself better by being less distracted. It sowed the seed for an interest in meditation.

I took this lesson on board and applied it to my life as far as I was able. I practised not worrying when I found myself doing it. At the age of 17 I had plenty of opportunity to practise it in the lead-up to Year 12 exams. In those days, 100% of your year's marks were dependent on a series of three-hour, end-of-year exams, and your choices for university courses were entirely dependent on these marks. I used to prepare myself for exams by being organised in my studies, but also staying fit, and having a social life. I never studied late the night before exams. I would finish before dinner, eat, chill with the family, go for a run, have a warm bath, relax and then get a good night's sleep. On the morning of an exam I would

walk from the train station and literally smell the roses rather than sit in the bus or outside the exam room catastrophising with my friends. I had noticed that the best thing I could take into the exam room with me was a calm but attentive mind. Once, this preparation really came to the fore in the Year 12 chemistry exam. I easily finished the three-hour exam in well under an hour and a half, which I thought a little unusual. I checked over it and all seemed OK. I waited, deciding not to leave the exam, and with about 10 minutes to go I thought I might just check over things one more time. As I turned the pages of the exam paper I noticed something interesting. Two of the pages were stuck together. When I parted them I found that there was close to a third of the exam totally unseen. What I noticed next was even more interesting. My mind immediately noted there was not a moment to waste in recriminations, frustration or throwing my hands up in the air. Every second counted and the paper in front of me needed my full and undivided attention. I felt alive, invigorated and calm, but resolved to set myself the challenge of seeing how many of the questions I could complete in the remaining 10 minutes. This was a life-defining event because doing poorly on this exam meant being unable to do medicine, which is what I had set as my goal. Anxiety about the outcome was irrelevant and a total distraction from the task in front of me. Strangely, I actually found myself enjoying the challenge. I had never been so focused, and I suspect that preparing myself for exams in the way I had now showed its true value. In those 10 minutes I nearly finished that third of the exam. I left the exam calm, knowing that I had given the best I could under the circumstances. The rest is history, but I took away from this experience a sense that we are capable of far more than we generally give ourselves credit for if we are truly and completely engaged in what is in front of us.

Another important formative experience occurred at the age of 19. At the time I was experiencing much of the usual angst that comes with being a teenager and a medical student, especially one

who was feeling somewhat disillusioned with university studies and without a clear sense of direction in life. I found it difficult to engage with the course and was ready to bomb out badly in my studies, although the thought of failure seemed to me to be a fate worse than death. Really wishing to be free of this burden, the thought of meditation resurfaced in my mind. Not knowing what it was, nor having read any books on the subject, the simplest thing I could think of was just sitting still and observing without getting involved in whatever was under observation. So, with eyes closed, and a beginner's mind, I sat quietly and impartially noticed the environment, the body and the mind for quite some time. (It was in fact in the same chair as the previously described swimming experience so maybe there was something magical about that chair?) Nevertheless, this practice in just being the unattached observer led me to being a different person when I got out of the chair, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I had a different perspective on life, the mind and body, and my relationship to them. I realised that the centre of my being, who I really was at heart, was the impartial witness of my body and mind and this had no fixed relationship to thoughts, feelings and sensations. They came and went (changing) while the awareness simply watched (unchanging). Underneath all that angst it was self-evidently true that, at the core of our being, we are completely whole and unaffected by the passing experiences of life. What was also interesting was that although I felt free or non-attached to my moment-by-moment experiences as they unfolded; those experiences were nevertheless intensely vivid and clear. I had never felt so intensely alive but at peace at the same time. The stability and clarity from that experience helped me to get back on track with studies to the point that I caught up enough to avert the impending failure. From then life began to open up again rather than close down.

Soon, after exams, I went camping with friends at a surf beach. I can still remember hitting the surf in the early morning for my first swim of the summer, swimming out through the break

and then turning back towards the town and the forest-clad hills behind. The pristine wave that had just passed me by broke, sending up a gentle spray that floated for what seemed to be an eternity in the gentle offshore breeze. The roar of the wave settled leaving the sound of the foam bristling as if I could hear each individual bubble burst. There was nowhere else to be and no other time — just here, just now.

Men (and women) occasionally stumble over the truth,
but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as
if nothing ever happened.

Winston Churchill

I quietly took note of my moments of being awake. They do not come along that often, probably more when we are younger than as we age, but they are there if we care to notice them. These insights deeply sowed a seed for my future life and work. What I learned, although I did not fully understand it or have a language for it at the time, led me eventually to dedicate my life's work to the teaching of mindfulness.

What's mindfulness and what's all the fuss about?

Mindfulness could be defined in a lot of different ways, which does not mean that one definition is right and the others are wrong. It just means that, like trying to describe an elephant, the description will vary depending on which part of the elephant we focus on. Mindfulness could be described, in simplest terms, as a practice in 'attention regulation', which is psychology-speak for paying attention. There are three aspects to attention regulation:

1. To know where our attention is.
2. To prioritise where it needs to be.
3. For the attention to go there and stay there.

We do not need to reflect for too long to have noticed that much of the time we do not know where our attention is. For example, we might be doing something like being in a conversation with our

partner, studying, or eating lunch and then all of a sudden we realise that we have not heard a word of what our partner was saying, that we were not taking in what we were reading, or we did not taste a mouthful of what we were eating. We were unmindful or distracted without even knowing.

The second bit is that at any given moment there is a main priority for the attention. If the attention is not on what it needs to be on then we are, as the saying goes, away with the birds. What does being unmindful cost us? We do not communicate well or deeply, we waste our time and, we do not enjoy our life. Being unmindful may cost us more than we realise. When driving a car, a person addicted to his or her mobile phone might feel tempted to text someone. Priority number one when driving a car is what is happening on the road. Texting while driving increases the risk of having a car accident at least 23-fold.¹ Now that is going to be expensive sooner or later whether in monetary terms, in terms of our health, or maybe even loss of life. The prioritising of where the attention needs to be in mindfulness terms is pretty simple. When driving it is the road. When having a conversation it is the person we are talking to. When eating it is the food. When showering it is the water on the body. When working towards a tight deadline it is the job in front of us. When preparing for an upcoming speaking engagement, again, it is the job in front of us. It is amazing how worry does a really good impersonation of preparation. Worrying, catastrophising, negative self-talk, and beating ourselves up about the past, are distractions.

The next step is simple, but not easy. Once we are conscious of where our attention needs to be then the attention simply needs to go there and stay there, which means returning it to whatever we need to be paying attention to. That takes practice, but every time we practice doing it the areas of the brain that control attention get a workout — like a muscle, this region of the brain gets stronger the more we use it.

Unfortunately, with the pace of life, screen time, and all the multitasking and distraction common in the world today, these important regions of the brain get a little rusty or frazzled. We are living in an increasingly distracted world where it takes more and more stimulation to get our attention and hold it for more than a few moments. And when we consider that 99% of our life is made up of simple moments that do not jump out at us, we are potentially missing 99% of our lives because we are not paying attention. The simple pleasures of eating, hearing birdsong in the mornings, noticing the shape of clouds, or feeling the breeze on our face hardly gets a look-in. T.S. Eliot said it far more eloquently in his poem, *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.
 Through the unknown, unremembered gate
 When the last of earth left to discover
 Is that which was the beginning;
 At the source of the longest river
 The voice of the hidden waterfall
 And the children in the apple-tree
 Not known, because not looked for
 But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
 Between two waves of the sea.
 Quick now, here, now, always —
 A condition of complete simplicity ...

Default mode, distraction and technology

What does the mind do when we are not paying attention? It slips quietly into what is called 'default mode'. Default mode has many different aspects — for example, daydreaming, worrying about the future, negative self-talk, living in the past, and catastrophising. It is interesting to note that a mind wandering in this way is associated with vulnerability to depression and anxiety, as well as our brain and DNA ageing more quickly. An attentive, mindful mind on the other hand is associated with less stress, a healthier brain and even a slower

rate of ageing of our DNA, according to the Australian Nobel prize-winning researcher, Elizabeth Blackburn and her team.²

As the world speeds up attention spans have been reducing. It is not just about attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but also about the attention levels of the general community. The tendency to have a shorter attention span because of being in a hyperkinetic, time-pressured environment — such as at work — has been called attention deficit trait (ADT).³ ADT is associated with things like black and white thinking, difficulty staying organised, managing time and prioritising, and a constant low level of panic, and guilt about getting off the treadmill. Related problems can manifest as checking emails and phone messages all the time. At its worst, it is an addiction. Some studies suggest that about a quarter of young people have a level of addiction to their mobile devices.⁴ Modern technology has gone from being a helpful servant to becoming a tyrannical master.

Technology in the form of screen time (for example, television, mobile devices and the Internet) is both a blessing from entertainment and convenience perspectives, but a curse from an attention perspective. According to research, the more screen we have in early childhood the more likely we are to have ADHD by later childhood.⁵ At the other end of the life cycle, the more screen time in adult years we have then the greater the risk of Alzheimer's disease.^{6,7} Attention, engagement and real rather than virtual experience is healthy exercise for the brain and if we do not use it in a real way, the more the connections in the brain get pruned back and the more it 'rusts'. The more we interact with the world, engage with it, the more creative we are, and the more we keep learning, the younger the brain remains. Older people who are engaged in such a way are likely to have the brains of people in their twenties.⁸

The therapeutic benefits of meditation

The benefits of meditation and being aware are not new. The world's great wisdom traditions had come to that conclusion millennia ago;

and so you will find variations of meditative and contemplative practices at the heart of spiritual life across many different cultures. Well, thankfully, the modern world is beginning to catch up.

In the modern day, the original scientific research on meditation in the 1970s and 80s was largely done on Transcendental Meditation, otherwise known as TM. Herbert Benson founded the Harvard Mind-Body Institute and coined the term ‘the relaxation response’ because the physiological and biochemical changes found in meditation (such as reductions in adrenaline, cortisol and blood pressure) were the opposite of what happened in the ‘stress’ or ‘fight or flight’ response. From this promising beginning more recent research has focused on the therapeutic effects of mindfulness meditation and related forms of psychotherapy such as MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy), MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) and DBT (Dialectic Behaviour Therapy).⁹

Attention, like any other skill, can be trained, but development of attention is gradual, progressive and requires regular practice.¹⁰ A high level of distracted or ‘default’ mental activity is associated with poorer mental health, depression and anxiety — in those contexts it is called rumination and worry. In people who are trained in mindfulness, however, it has been found that the level of default mental activity is reduced, and even when it is present the areas of the brain involved with self-monitoring and cognitive control are also active. This equates with a person being more aware of the presence of this mental activity and a capacity not to be so drawn into it.¹¹

Some benefits of meditation-based approaches

1. Mental health, for example:¹²
 - depression relapse prevention^{13,14}
 - reduced anxiety, panic disorder, and stress
 - enhanced emotional regulation and emotional intelligence¹⁵
 - managing addiction (smoking¹⁶ and drug rehabilitation)

- improved sleep^{17,18}
 - better coping¹⁹
 - less avoidance and greater self-control^{20,21}
 - reduced burnout²²
 - greater empathy and compassion.^{23,24}
2. Neuroscience, for example:^{25,26,27,28,29}
- structural and functional changes in the brain (neuroplasticity)
 - generation of new brain cells (neurogenesis), particularly in the memory and executive functioning centres which has implications for the prevention of dementia
 - reduced activity in the amygdala³⁰ (the fear and anxiety centre in the brain)
 - improved sensory processing and working memory
 - greater mental flexibility.³¹
3. Clinical, for example:
- better pain management,^{32,33,34} symptom control and coping with major illnesses like cancer^{35,36}
 - reduced physiological wear and tear (allostatic load) associated with chronic stress
 - metabolic benefits (reduced blood pressure, glucose and lipids)
 - better weight management and improvement in eating disorders^{37,38}
 - reversal of cardiovascular disease³⁹
 - improved genetic repair (telomerase activity) and slower ageing^{40,41}
 - down-regulating stress genes⁴²
 - improved immunity^{43,44} and significantly reduced illness-related days off work.⁴⁵
4. Improved performance, for example:
- executive functioning⁴⁶
 - sport — zone or flow states^{47,48}
 - academic
 - leadership.

Being mindful in day-to-day life

The informal practice of mindfulness means being mindful as we go about our day-to-day life. In simple terms it means to taste our food when we are eating it, to listen to the person we are speaking to, to pay attention to the cars on the road when we are driving, to feel the earth beneath our feet when we are walking, to feel the rhythm of the music when we are dancing, and to feel the flow of the wave beneath us when we are surfing. It is so simple. It is just a matter of being in touch, of coming to our senses, of living our life authentically and fully. What is the point of thinking about holidays when we are at work and thinking about work when we are on holiday?

If we are not paying attention then the mind is off doing something else — for example, worrying, catastrophising, going over the past or criticising ourselves. What do we get in return for investing all our precious time and energy in this distracted state of mind? Heartache, anger, fear and grief for starters. It is a waste. It is more than a waste — it is a crime we commit on ourselves. What is the remedy? Be aware. Be awake. Be in the present moment. Be here, now. Be mindful.

Mindfulness is not rocket science. It is as simple as something can be, but having said it is simple does not mean that it is easy. It requires practice and patience and sometimes a bit of courage.

The great thing about the body is that it is always in the present moment, so any time we pay attention to it, it helps to bring the mind back into the present moment. The body communicates with the world through the senses and so being mindful is simply a practice in ‘coming to our senses’ or ‘getting in touch’. If we notice that while we are walking down the street we are away with the birds, worrying about how something is going to turn out the following day, we can notice what is happening and come back to the here and now by engaging with what is going on around us, like listening to the actual birds or feeling our feet as we walk along the street.

If we are preparing for something potentially challenging then we might notice the difference between being on-task and worrying or speculating about how it is going to go. Worry often does a good impersonation of preparation, but it is actually a distraction. Mindfulness is not a distraction from the worries, it is the remedy for distraction. We can get back on task and acknowledge that we will not know what will happen until it happens, so there is no point in living the event in our imaginations before it happens. Nor is there any point in reliving it, wishing it was different after it has come and gone. Even if the event did not go the way we would have liked then pay attention to what happened, learn from it, and move on.

Mindfulness meditation practice

The informal practice of mindfulness is made a whole lot easier if we formally practice mindfulness meditation on a regular basis. A day is just like a book. If it is not punctuated then things blur into each other and it makes little sense. These ‘punctuation marks’ are times of consciously coming to rest so that we can remind ourselves to be present and pay attention. For this reason the two following practices are suggested. The ‘full stop’ could be practised anything from five to thirty minutes twice a day depending on motivation and opportunity. The ‘comma’ is for fifteen seconds to two minutes as often as we remember throughout the day. Even a few seconds can be useful before we launch into something. The comma is particularly useful between completing one activity and beginning another.

Exercise 1: ‘The full stop’

Sit your body in a chair so that your spine is upright and balanced but relaxed. Have your body symmetrical and allow your eyes to gently close.

Now, move your attention gently through each step. Be conscious of your body and its connection with the chair. Feel your

feet on the floor. Notice if your feet are tense. If so, allow them to relax if they want to. Similarly, be aware of your legs and allow them to relax if they wish, and so gently move up through each part of your body: the stomach, hands, arms, shoulders, neck and face. If tension or discomfort remains, just notice the presence of tension or discomfort without judgment.

Now take in a deep breath and slowly and gently let the breath out. Repeat this twice more then just allow the breathing to settle into its own natural rhythm without having to control it in any way. If you observe a tendency to try and control the breath, just impartially notice that. Simply be conscious of the breath as the air flows in and out of the nose. If thoughts come to your awareness allow them to come and go without judgment and let the attention return to the breathing. There is no need to struggle with the activity of the mind, nor even wish that it was not there. Like ‘trains of thought’, just let them come and go.

After a time, let the attention move to the listening. Hear whatever sounds there are to hear without having to analyse the sounds. Once again, if thoughts come let them pass. If the mind becomes distracted — for example by listening to some mental commentary or chatter — simply notice and return to the sounds as a gentle way of returning to the present moment.

At the end of this exercise simply be aware of the body again and then slowly allow the eyes to open. After a few moments, quietly move into whatever activities await you.

Exercise 2: ‘The comma’

This exercise can take anywhere from a few seconds to a couple of minutes. It is a short punctuation in a busy day between finishing one activity and starting another; for example, before starting the car, beginning a meal, before an interview, or between patients. It helps to ‘clean the slate’, making us fresher for the next activity.

The steps and principles are the same as above, just much shorter. Be aware of the body and allow the posture to be balanced

and relaxed but upright. Let the body relax generally by taking one or two deep breaths and breathing the tension out. Then let the breath settle and allow the attention to rest with it. Then be aware of the environment and the sounds in it as they come and go. Do not prolong the comma past what is appropriate for that moment, then move quietly into whatever awaits you.

If you are in a busy office or somewhere else where it would be conspicuous to close your eyes, just keep them open but rest them on a point in front of you, perhaps on the floor, as you practise.

The mindful way of looking at life

If mindfulness was just meditating and paying attention to what is in front of us then it would be easy to think there is not much to it. What it really means to be mindful, however, is a lot more than that. The big four ‘cognitive aspects’ from a mindfulness perspective are perception, letting go (non-attachment), acceptance, and being in the present moment. These mindfulness principles are the foundation for mindfulness-based approaches to psychological therapies like Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) and the author's own Stress Release Program (SRP).⁴⁹ Such programs operate on the same principles, but the emphasis and structure vary.

Perception — seeing things as they are

‘Stressors’ are the situations, events, circumstances or people that triggers the stress or ‘fight or flight’ response. If we see a tiger then we need to run away fast, but if we imagine a tiger and take the imagination to be real then the imaginary stressor will activate fight or flight in exactly the same way. Unfortunately, 99% of the things we are getting stressed about are the things going on in our imaginations: anticipation, worry etc., etc., etc. We are perceiving stressors most of the time that do not even exist, or have not

happened yet, or have already come and gone. To reduce stress mindfully is not so much a matter of replacing a false perception of a non-existent stressor with a falsely positive one. It is more a matter of just seeing things as they are, no more and no less.

Taking imagination to be real is the first distortion of perception that comes with un-mindfulness. Reality is easy to deal with compared to the imagination taken to be real. The former we can respond to, the latter is like fighting with a phantom that keeps coming back to haunt us.

The second distortion of perception is to perceive something to be bigger or more threatening than it really is, like making a mountain out of a molehill. A mouse, for example, is just a mouse despite the fact that we may perceive a monster. The physical discomfort that we actually experience in the dentist's chair is generally minor compared to the level of intense suffering we produce for ourselves by imagining the pain to be worse than it is because of our fear and emotional reaction to it. Pain, for example, not amplified through the lens of fear and anticipation, is far more manageable. When unmindful, our thoughts unconsciously colour the way we see the world. A simple comment from someone can be turned in to a major criticism if it is distorted and exaggerated by insecurity and self-criticism. From the perspective of mindfulness, pleasant misperceptions, expectations and mental projections are just as distracting and problematic as unpleasant ones.

The mindful remedy to all this unnecessary suffering is to simply pay attention to what is being experienced on its merits, rather than blindly reacting to what we project onto situations. Stop and have a fresh, unbiased look at the so-called stressor. In mindfulness, all one asks is to see things as they are; no more and no less.

Letting go — freedom through non-attachment

There is a metaphorical story that describes the human condition relating to how hunters catch monkeys. Pots with narrow necks

are buried in the ground. If you put a piece of food inside, the monkeys will soon come across the pot and want to get to the food, so they slip their hand inside the pot in order to grasp the contents. When they try to extract the fist grasping the food it is now too wide to fit through the mouth of the pot. The monkey screams, believing itself to be trapped, and the hunter just walks up and takes the monkey. We read this story and think: 'Silly monkey, why didn't it just let go of the food and remain free.' Well, for most of our lives, we are like the monkeys in the way we hold on to, get attached to, or get caught up in things, and we will not let go.

Relaxing, mentally or physically, is not a matter of 'doing' anything. It is more a matter of stopping something that we are doing which is 'holding on'. Not holding on could be called detachment or non-attachment, but non-attachment is often misunderstood. It is not about getting rid of, cutting-off from, or denying what is going on. It is more a matter of not being bound to it. It is an understandable mistake to think that sensations, thoughts and feelings, particularly the ones we do not like, have a hold of us. Mindfulness shows us that it is the other way around — we have a hold of them. The tension we experience is because we latch on to and pull against what is taking place.

Our language reveals a lot about the pervasiveness of attachment to thoughts and emotions; for example, to 'hold an opinion', or 'in the grips of fear'. If a depressive thought comes into the mind, such as 'Nobody cares about me', we may start wrestling with the thought, going over it, arguing with it, or wishing it was not there, but there is another option. We can just stand back from the thought and let it come and go without having to get involved with it. We will not be moved by a train of thought if we do not fight with it or get on it. It is not so much a matter of changing or suppressing the thought, but rather changing the relationship to it. If we have habitually gotten on that train of thought then if we are unmindful we will automatically get on it whenever it comes

along. If we practise noticing it, not judging it, and not getting on it, then it will not influence us when it comes along. Sooner or later it will start coming a whole lot less.

All experiences come and go much more easily if we let them. If we hold on then we feel moved, imprisoned, influenced and even dominated by them. Control, in a mindful way, naturally restores itself when we let go of the attachment to the experiences, rather than trying to get rid of the experience itself. For example, we can try and suppress anger but it is stressful, takes a lot of energy and eventually comes out in some other way. From a mindfulness perspective it is not so much a matter of trying to control the anger but rather being aware of it without being controlled by it. Mindfulness meditation will give us plenty of opportunity to practise exactly that. During meditation welcome all experiences, even things we do not like, as an opportunity to practise being less caught up in them. Mind you, non-attachment to the pain associated with our hand being on a hotplate is very good, but taking the hand off the hotplate is also good.

It is an inevitable fact that experiences are coming and going all the time, whether we want them to or not. If we forget that simple truth we are in for some problems. If we get attached to the pleasant ones then we grieve when they are gone. Being bound by our experiences is an unconscious habit, not a necessity. It feels like a great relief to let go, not because it is foreign to us but because it is natural. We have become so habituated to tension that we have come to believe that it is our natural state, but we were not born anxious, preoccupied and distracted; we have managed to think our way into those states as we grew up.

There are some common misconceptions about letting go; for example, that letting go is about not responding to life even when a response is called for. If we see something that needs to be righted then it is not mindful to ignore it under the pretense we are 'letting go'. That is avoidance pretending to be mindfulness.

Mindfulness helps us engage and respond when we need to by first letting go of the tension and resistance that often gets in the way of that response.

Acceptance — equanimity even in the face of adversity

An important principle related to letting go is acceptance. Whatever is happening is happening, and mindfulness is not some magical trick to deny that fact. At one moment there is comfort, peace, success or happiness. Enjoy it, but remember that it will change. The next moment there may well be an experience of pain, anxiety, failure or depression. Be patient, show ourselves a little self-compassion and remember that it too will change. The famous serenity prayer reminds us that we should try and change for the better what we can change, be patient with the things we cannot change, and hopefully have the wisdom to tell the difference.

The crucial factor in how much impact an experience has on us, no matter how big or small, is the attitude we bring to it. Viktor Frankl, the famous psychiatrist and author who endured the horrors of being a Holocaust survivor, has much to say on how to survive and even grow through the worst of adversity. Although he does not use the word ‘mindfulness’ in the following two quotes, he clearly teaches us something about it:

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

Accepting something, or being at peace with it, especially the things we find painful, is not easy. It takes time, patience and a dose of courage. True acceptance is not about trying to make something go away, as if we said to ourselves: ‘If I accept this then it will go away.’ When it does not go away we practise acceptance even harder, but it

still does not go away, so we start getting angry or despondent saying ‘mindfulness doesn’t work for me’. But using acceptance in order to make something go away is actually non-acceptance masquerading as acceptance — it is unmindfulness pretending to be mindfulness. It is one of the most common tricks that minds gets up to. Acceptance is exactly what it says — acceptance. With true acceptance we may find that the suffering associated with the experience starts to subside even if the experience is still there.

Presence of mind — being in the here and now

The present moment is the only moment that has any legitimate claim to reality. The past and future never actually exist outside of the thoughts we are having about them in the here and now. In the present we may notice that the mind imagines and projects into what it imagines the future to be or what it thinks the past was. The residual effects from past thoughts, feelings, actions and decisions are with us now, but that can only be responded to in the present moment.

For example, we might be apprehensive about an upcoming public speaking engagement the following day. If we notice what is happening in the mind at the time we are anxious, we will discover that the mind is already living the event and a thousand and one catastrophes before they have even happened. Or we might have had an argument with someone in the past and we relive it a thousand times, thus turning one argument into a thousand. ‘Presence of mind’, on the other hand, describes a state of being focused, responsible, brave and capable even in a challenging situation.

When we experience anxiety, fear, depression or worry we will notice that this involves the mind unconsciously slipping into a future that has not happened or a past which has already come and gone. It is a form of absent-mindedness. In the meantime, focus is disconnected from what is happening here and now. The result? We do not enjoy the present moment, we do not respond well and our experience of it is clouded by our mental projections.

In our imaginary future we tend to imagine problems that never happen. This is sometimes called ‘catastrophising’. As Mark Twain said: ‘I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.’ We concoct anxiety and fear, dwell on rigid ideas about how things must turn out, and pre-judge situations and conversations long before they happen. Then we become anxious about how to get things to go the way we assume they must, and feel frustration or grief because they do not go that way.

What about planning and preparation? Planning and preparation can be as much present moment activities as anything else is. If we plan or prepare then it is useful to do it with attention. Worry and rumination is not planning or preparation. We could be so preoccupied about a future exam that we cannot get our attention on what we need to do to prepare for it — study. That makes no sense and yet we often do it. We can feel exhausted by anticipating how much work we have to do even before we have done any of it.

Living in the ‘here and now’ also does not mean becoming a hedonist who doesn’t care about the results of actions, or not caring about the future, or having no goals. It does mean that we let the future come to us moment by moment as we practise dealing with each moment on its merits, patiently directing our attention to what the moment requires and taking the action necessary in that moment.

In closing

I learned all my important lessons about mindfulness from my life, and all my important life lessons when I was mindful. The only way to learn about it is to practise it and live it. When we have our unmindful moments, as we inevitably will, we do not need to spend a lot of time beating ourselves up. We can just remind ourselves of the importance of living consciously, welcome the reminder, and move on.

Endnotes

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