

The Art of Now

Reflections on Mindfulness

Life is found in the present, all around us. We just fail to notice, to look, to take it all in. We worry about the future and borrow misery and fear from ruminations about the past. We move about only in action and allow little time for our minds and bodies to quiet and calm.

Being able to separate out from the rush and introspect about ourselves as being apart from the past or future is a skill poorly learned in our attention-deficit society. Much of what I teach in management of the pressures of modern living revolves around the person's ability to "find themselves" in the present.

Living in the moment-otherwise known as mindfulness-is what happens when we engage in an active, open, intentional attention on the present. Introspection on how we are connected in the moment helps you to see that you are not just your consciousness but an observer of the thoughts that you create.

As one moves and centers into a state of mindfulness the opportunity to suspend judgment about what you are thinking. One is able to be with the thought as it exists, neither good nor bad, merely being.

By suspending judgment and freeing our minds of assessing and quantifying into then, now, and later we achieve a variety of benefits. The mind-body connection, in an effort to protect and prepare, reacts to an alerting, questioning mind by stimulating the sympathetic nervous system. This system "lights up" the body into a defensive posture which can take a toll over time. Contemporary living tends to leave us in this "on" position with resultant stress and physical health problems.

Mindfulness helps the body by taking us down from the alerted status. This state of detached awareness relaxes our muscles, boosts our immune system, and reduces anxiety and chronic pain. People who are able to incorporate mindfulness into their lifestyle appear to be happier and more optimistic with better self-image and confidence. Being mindful in the moment reduces impulsivity and reactivity that can contribute to depression.

The concept of mindfulness can be found in the major world religions. Meditation and prayer encourage the release of tension and allow for a reflection of finding one's self in the world as it is.

While one cannot "plan" or seek a direction to the moment there are ways to improve the attainment of mindfulness. Here are some ideas that you might consider:

Stop thinking about it! (un-selfconsciousness): The paradox of mindfulness is that when one put too much attention in noticing what is happening their performance will likely get worse. In college I took up playing the guitar. I found that pay too much attention to where my fingertips were on the fretboard only worsened my playing. What improved my playing was to shift my focus away from myself and concentrate on what was happening around me...the motion, the mood of others in the room as I played. Mindfulness blurs the distinction between one's self and others. Buddhist monks would explain this concept as being "one with everything".

By reducing self-consciousness we are able to observe (but not react) to the negativity and condemnation of others about us without having to feel impacted by it. It is these self-evaluations that can sap our energy and rob us of our health and vigor.

Second, take a note of a focus on the present. (savoring). Have you noticed that some people are so busy video-taping an event that they may not have any sense of actually being there. We enjoy a refreshing drink only to reflect on how it was so much better than one we had the day before. We chew down on a tasty cookie only to fear that we might soon run out of them. Learning to relish and savor the moment we find ourselves in helps to bring an anchor to where we find ourselves at.

Practice each day slowing your way through some experience and taking note of the sensory experience. Notice how something looks, how it tastes, smells, feels, or sounds. Such a focus can draw out more happiness and joy as life awakens and becomes deeper.

Blend yourself among the people around you helps to draw you into a more connected moment with others. Living consciously with an alerted interest in others can reduce aggressive tendencies and impulsive behavior. Mindfulness can help you to interpret and react to what is in your mind. It increases the gap between emotional impulse and action which allows you to better pace and measure your relationships. Taking a breath before you act can help to improve your social interactions and provide greater cohesion with your family, partners, friends, and other contacts.

To find the time you have to lost it! Living in the moment calls for a state of total absorption. Taking the opportunity to "flow" with the world around you leaves you engaged to the point where you lose track of everything else around you.

Identify a task that you can easily perform but is still challenging. The goals involved need to be clearly defined so you know when you can progress. As your attentional focus narrows, self-consciousness evaporates. Your awareness of the moment blends with the action you are providing. Action feels effortless.

Acceptance of life's disappointments and short-comings can help to ease the transition into mindfulness. Asking people to look for the pains in their lives can actually increase their sense of it. Therefore it can be useful to move toward it in order to release it. We can end up having emotions about other emotions...those that we are trying to avoid. This takes us away from the world around us as we stew in regrets or fears. Letting the emotion lay there, open and exposed, encourages us to move past what has happened and be in a place where we have control...in the moment.

As one ages there is the maturity that occurs in learning that one doesn't know as much as they thought. Knowing that you don't know fosters ENGAGEMENT where we take note of new aspects in even the most common experiences. Being open to the new in life fosters an empathic connection with others and yourself.

Finally, follow the rule of mindfulness that follows the concept of "don't just do something, just sit there". It takes effort to be mindful but the moments that we find there are easy. Achieving mindfulness is the end-point of the activity not something that is wrapped up in pursue of something else like a healthy lifestyle or long-life. There is only what there is in the moment. Place yourself in the role of the silent eternal witness and take note of the moment. Because mindfulness is about the present and goals are about the future it is not possible to set this as your goal. Focus on your changing awareness without a clear intention of what you might notice next.

Remember that wherever you are it is where you are suppose to be.