

Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance



• WEEK 6: Mindfulness as a way of life - Tips for living mindfully

Awareness

Just being able to recognise default mode is very important. It means that we don't get stuck in it quite as much, but start to have moments where we literally "wake up" out of it. As we do so, we start to recognise this other way of being called mindfulness. We can start noticing the benefits of being more engaged and present with our lives, for both wellbeing and performance. Simply observing the effects each mode of attention has on our lives naturally leads us towards developing more mindfulness – the capacity for nonjudgmental awareness of each moment.

One thing that is important to remember is that simply noticing the tendency to be in default mode, without even having the intention the intention to change it, means that we are developing awareness and the ability to be present.

Attention

Attention is a central quality of mindfulness. Once we notice that our attention is caught up in default mode, it becomes possible to bring it back to whatever is happening in the present. We literally start 'coming to our senses'. As we do so repeatedly, through sustained effort in both meditation and informal practices/applications ('off the cushion', so to speak), we find that it becomes easier to do. We notice more often when we are in default mode, and are more easily able to simply re-engage the attention on what is happening in the moment. As we learn to do this without further thinking (i.e. following the thought/distraction or judging/reacting to it), we get quicker at noticing mind

wandering and coming back. We spend more time in the present and start experiencing more of the benefits and joys of living an engaged life.

Curiosity

One of the things that helps with the increased awareness and attention regulation is curiosity. This is why we often say it is the second central quality of mindfulness, after attention. While curiosity is an innate quality (we are born with it – just watch little children and how they interact with the world), we lose touch with it as life gets faster and we start to relate to the world through concepts and ideas rather than directly through the senses, and as we start to take things for granted and do them on automatic pilot.

But as we have seen, we can rediscover this quality through mindfulness. Mindfulness is the exact opposite of taking things for granted. And when we intentionally cultivate an attitude of curiosity and interest, we get back in touch with this innate quality. In the course, we noticed how genuine curiosity engages us in our senses, bringing us fully into the present moment. We noticed how relaxing and enjoyable this can be, even when we bring this curiosity to mundane, everyday objects like breathing, which we would normally take for granted. In fact, especially when we bring curiosity to everyday experiences such as this.

When we bring curiosity we can notice new things as well, such as how our breath is cooler on the inhalation and warmer on the exhalation. Things also tend to seem more vivid – sounds clearer, images brighter, food tastier. We were invited to explore other aspects of our lives in this way, through the informal practices of mindfulness – bringing curiosity to everyday activities.

We noticed that when we did this, even simple things like brushing our teeth, travelling and communication became mindfulness 'practices'. How, when we practised in this way, we experienced the same sense of calming the mind and sharpening the attention as when we sit in meditation. And so we learned how to take mindfulness 'off the cushion' and out into our lives.

Perhaps most importantly, in any moment where we are genuinely curious about something, we are not reacting to it. In the beginning of mindfulness practice, for instance, we might at times think we are accepting some experience, but very subtly be resisting it. This is easy to do and takes some work to recognise.

But when we open to the possibility of genuinely feeling them and relating to them directly, as they are, we suddenly find that they don't even need to go away for us to be happy. We can relax and enjoy the very situation we are in, even if some unpleasant experience e.g. strong emotions are part of that situation. This is a very important thing to remember in our day-to-day life and is one of the deeper truths of mindfulness.

Gentleness

Related to this is the idea of gentleness. Through the 'puppy' metaphor and an intention to be gentler with ourselves in each moment, this has gone beyond being a concept and become an actual experience. Even if we found that we continued to be rough with ourselves, at least now we know we are doing it, and can start to observe its effects.

But we may also have realised that when we let ourselves fully feel the discomfort (or even pain) of being rough, and notice the times we were kinder and gentler, we were naturally drawn to this kinder way of being. The mind starts to calm down, we feel better, and we are less avoidant of difficulties (so we can address them more effectively).

As you move forward after this course, become really curious about the difference between these two ways of relating to yourself and the things around you. How it feels, how others respond to you, that sort of thing. Noticing this will tend to motivate you to be more gentle.

Compassion

And as we start being gentler with ourselves we experience not only a reduction in stress but also a paradoxical increase in our effectiveness and productivity, as we cease wasting energy fighting with ourselves.

Having recognised the benefits of this way of being for ourselves, it is common for people practising mindfulness to then find themselves spontaneously bringing a more compassionate attitude to others. Recognising that people who are difficult are simply caught up in default mode and stress reactions (often with absolutely no idea that this is what is happening to them) tends to spontaneously result in being gentler with them. Just as being willing to truly be with our own difficult thoughts and emotions (perhaps by placing our hand on our heart and/or being genuinely curious about what is coming up) leads to greater wellbeing, bringing this same acceptance, presence and curiosity to others often has a way of transforming the situation.

Or, at the very least, ensuring that we don't make the situation even worse for ourselves by getting into a stress reaction of our own. We may even like to experiment with sending kind thoughts to the person, perhaps recognising that if they are difficult with us for 5 minutes, they are like that with themselves 24/7. We will learn how to do a Sending Kind Thoughts meditation this week.

Letting go

Once we have started to experience gentleness and acceptance of what is happening, we can start to understand what it really means to let go. If we had jumped straight into the letting go part, there is a strong chance that we can practise what we think is 'letting go' but is actually attempts to avoid or get rid of certain experiences.

Consider a ladybird in your hand. We can open up our hand, and that is letting go. Whether the ladybird flies away, or crawls around our hand for a while, or stays exactly where it is, or even flies away and comes back a few times, nobody can say for sure. All that is certain is that we can be holding on in some moments, and letting go in others. We can continue to recognise when we are holding on by noticing the tension (and, often, conflict) that comes with it, and taking a moment to pause and get genuinely curious about what is happening in our mind. Remember – letting go is a lifelong process, one which happens in each moment. Moment by moment.

Communicating

We also explored what it means to communicate mindfully. We can even do this with people we feel completely indifferent towards or have difficulty or conflict with. So why not make a commitment to communicating more mindfully from now on? To recognising our tendency to go off into the automatic pilot of 'communication', and instead to intentionally bring full presence to others. To really listen to what they are saying – not just the words, but to the nonverbal component of communication (which actually makes up 80% of the overall communication), such as the tone of their voice, the rate of their speech, their posture and their eye contact.

And when we speak, to really feel into what we want to say, rather than just talking, and perhaps taking a moment to pause after we have said it and check whether what we just said was really what we were trying to communicate. Keep communicating in this way and notice the effect it has on your relationships and wellbeing.

Pausing

Remember that mindfulness is something we can do in each moment. Even the more formal 'meditation' is scalable. We can sit for 5 or 10 (or more) minutes with our eyes closed, or we can simply take moments throughout the day to pause. We might close our eyes and meditate for 30 seconds. Or we might bring our attention to our breath for a moment, or even just feel our feet on the ground. All of these are ways of grounding ourselves. It is very useful to do this when we are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, and also punctuating the day with brief pauses, to disrupt the pattern of rushing from one thing to another in a blur. To stop and smell the roses, so to speak.

Pausing in this way can be extremely powerful. The automatic pilot of the day can get so strong and pervasive that at times we can be in it for large parts of the day. Remembering to just stop and take a few breaths of look around once in a while can break this pattern, and we then tend to find that we start spontaneously having moments of presence at other times during the day. Often when we least expect it.

As Ferris Bueller said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

Discipline

Prior to learning about mindfulness, most people tend to think about discipline as being about forcing themselves to do things by criticising themselves for not trying hard enough. But after experiencing how simply noticing the mind wandering is a moment of awakening that allows (or even spontaneously results in) a natural reengagement with the present, the meaning of discipline tends to change.

Suddenly it is less about being rough with ourselves and more about recognising when we are off in default mode. And then being firm but gentle as we bring our attention back, knowing that any roughness will just agitate us further, and self-critical thoughts take us even further into default mode and away from what is actually happening in the present moment. Discipline, then, becomes a conscious (and life-long) process of waking up.

Neuroplasticity

It can be extremely motivating to remember that practising mindfulness literally rewires the brain for increased happiness, wellbeing and productivity. That is why we have explored it throughout this course. When we think about mindfulness from the perspective of neuroplasticity, we recognise that in any moment we are either practising waking up or we are practising being deeper in default mode. Moments where we recognise that we are in default mode are very valuable: in these moments we have literally 'woken up'. And when we bring our attention gently back to our senses once more, we form new connections in parts of our

brain associated with being present, especially the prefrontal cortex. This part of the brain then grows, connection-by-connection, moment-by-moment, and suddenly we start to find ourselves being spontaneously and effortlessly more present at other times, when we are not even consciously practising.

Two great books on this topic are *The Brain That Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge and *Buddha's Brain*, by Rick Hanson. You may like to read further on this if you are interested, as a way of understanding what is happening in your brain as you practise mindfulness, and/or as a way of motivating yourself to keep up this invaluable mental training.