

LIVING A MINDFUL LIFE

How to Live a Life Filled with Peace, Joy, Compassion & Wisdom



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Acknowledgments & Thanks

This book is the culmination of over twenty years of reading, research, contemplation, assimilation, condensation, and translation to render this vast topic approachable, understandable, relatable, and adoptable. I hope I have achieved this goal.

I also hope that you, and all those you share this with, get as much benefit from it as I have. For me personally, it has been nothing short of life-changing.

But no one achieves significant milestones in isolation, and this work is no exception:

- To my dear wife Lynda for her love, patience, and unflagging support as I toiled away many a long hour researching and writing.
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- And to everyone who took a bit of time out of their life to write to me about one of my blog posts – your questions, support, and kind comments are very much appreciated.

With my sincere thanks,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

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1. That any use of my content be attributed to me (seems only fair)! 😊
2. That the use of my material always fully respect and reflect its core intent, this being to spread the message of compassion, peace, and goodwill to all.

You do not need to seek my written permission in order to share or use my material but certainly do feel to drop me a line any time at mindful@living-a-mindful-life.com; I'd be very pleased to hear from you!

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Prologue: A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME

Hi, my name is Rob, and I look forward to being your guide to the many benefits of mindfulness!

So, who am I? Well, in addition to coming up on forty-five years of wedded bliss (Legal Disclosure: my dear wife may have a *marginally* different take on the 'bliss' part! 😊), my career included three years as a mining engineer before garnering an MBA, after which I switched to being a personal financial advisor, spending thirty-three years in that role.

My attraction to fact-based professions was no surprise given my highly-sceptical nature. If you wish me to believe something then you had better well be able to provide me with suitable proof.

So, when I was first introduced to mindfulness, I was rather sceptical; wasn't this just more New Age mumbo jumbo? But, as I got into it, my scepticism fell away. I had the proof I sought - ***in my direct experience.***

"We might reflect on how rare it is in spiritual teachings to have such a clear understanding of the precise qualities that lead to awakening. This understanding takes our journey out of the realm of mysticism and unquestioned faith into the realm of how the mind works: what conditions create suffering and what qualities lead to freedom."

Joseph Goldstein, "[Mindfulness - A Practical Guide to Awakening](#)"

It was in 1999, during my stint as an advisor, that I had the good fortune to meet a remarkable individual who, despite having endured a horrific experience - a traffic accident that killed her spouse and left her permanently wheelchair-bound to raise three young children - eventually emerged happy, content, and filled with gratitude.

She attributed her renewed bright take on life in part to her exposure to the spiritual teachings of individuals like Eckhart Tolle and Don Miguel Ruiz (see "[Suggested Reading](#)").

It was her story, guidance, and encouragement that got me started into mindfulness all those years ago.

Another key influence along my path to mindfulness came from my long-time friend, Laurie, who, with a not-so-subtle suggestion that I read the book, "[Please Understand Me](#)", helped me to realize that not everyone thinks like me or sees the world like me. What I learned from this was an important lesson - that other people's behavior, while foreign to me, is right for them and, as a result, does not deserve my condemnation. Another key mindful moment!

In getting this blog up and running (many thanks to my friend Tia for her generous technical guidance!) I quickly realized just how much effort goes into creating quality content. However, if what I have to share helps even one individual lead a better life, a more mindful life (perhaps you!), then my hours of toil will have been very fruitfully spent.

In this regard, I am inspired each day by the beautifully-worded, "*Vows of a Bodhisattva*" (see below), as espoused by the 8th-century Buddhist monk, Shantideva.

So, thank you for tuning in and do feel free to get in touch with your comments and suggestions - I look forward to hearing from you!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

P.S. If you enjoy my blog and believe it could be helpful to others, *I would be eternally grateful were you to share the link to [my site](#) or [my free, downloadable eBook](#)*. Those close to me know that time spent on social media like Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter is just not me. Fortunately, it is for millions of others, so if you are one of those millions, please social-media on my most appreciative behalf - and thank you!!! :-)

P.P.S. The image featured above is the Tibetan-language version of the Sanskrit mantra, Om Mani Padme Hum. In Buddhism it is associated with the embodiment of compassion, Avalokiteshvara. While there are many interpretations of this mantra, the one I favour provides guidance on how to conduct a good life, the six coloured components having the following meanings: be **generous** (om - in white), be **ethical** (ma - in green), be **patient** (ni - in yellow), be **perseverant** in the study of the Buddha's teachings (pad - in turquoise), be **mindful** (me - red), be **wise** (hum - in navy blue). (*image credit to [Christopher J. Flynn](#) under Wikimedia Commons licence*)

Vows of a Bodhisattva

May I be a guard for those who need protection

A guide for those on the path

A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood

May I be a lamp in the darkness

A resting place for the weary

A healing medicine for all who are sick

A vase of plenty

A tree of miracles

***And for the boundless multitudes of living beings, may I bring
sustenance and awakening***

Enduring like the earth and sky,

Until all beings are freed from sorrow

And all are awakened.

Shantideva, 8th century sage



Introduction: ON LIVING A MINDFUL LIFE

This blog is about how to live a mindful life and why we should do so.

But what exactly does 'living a mindful life' mean?

To answer this, let's consider how we tend to live our lives at present:

- **We're always in a hurry.** But this breeds stress which wreaks havoc with our mental and physical well-being.
- **We cling to life's 'good' parts.** But this leads to disappointment and frustration because impermanence reigns supreme; everything eventually comes to an end. Resist this truth and needless suffering results.
- **We try to flee life's 'bad' parts.** But this too leads to suffering because both the pleasant and unpleasant are intrinsic parts of life. Resist this reality and suffering follows.
- **We try to avoid life's 'boring' parts** by spacing out or immersing ourselves in idle distractions. Given the preciousness of life, how tragic is it to willingly toss much of it away?
- **We live mostly in an unconscious, instinct-driven, auto-pilot state.** Two tragedies follow. First, we tend to react to life's unpleasant moments unthinkingly and harshly, causing us and those around us needless harm. Second, we fail to note the many small joys of life that could otherwise nurture the sense of peace and contentment we all seek.
- **We devote much of our thinking to regretting the past or stressing about the future.** But this generates pointless mental anguish because the past can't be changed and the future is unknowable.

- **We tend to be judgmental**, labeling everything we encounter as 'good', 'bad', or 'indifferent'. In this manner we make our world very small, circumscribed by our biases and sorely-limited perspective.
- **We're happy when things go our way and unhappy when they don't.** But this just turns us into helpless victims whose contentment with life becomes contingent on factors outside our control.
- Thanks to our evolutionary inheritance **we tend to be self-centred, selfish, judgmental, biased to negativity, nepotistic, discontent, and unthinkingly reactive.**

"It's said that after the Buddha's enlightenment he was moved to teach by compassion because he saw all beings seeking happiness, wanting happiness, yet doing the very things that cause suffering."

Joseph Goldstein, "[Mindfulness - A Practical Guide to Awakening](#)"

By way of contrast, living a mindful life looks something like this:

- **We treat all parts of life - pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent - with complete equanimity.** Such is the path to a peaceful life, one lived with a contented, calm ease of being.
- **We realize fully that 'good', 'bad', or 'indifferent' are simply labels** - just thoughts we've made up in our head and that, with a change of those thoughts, change our perception of life.
- **We cease resisting reality - we cease resisting what already is.** Instead, we just deal with each situation in a matter-of-fact, calm manner. Doing so eliminates much needless anguish and drama.
- **We reside in the present moment**, the only moment that is real, the only moment when life can actually be experienced. It is not an overstatement to say that focusing our attention and awareness on the present moment is one of the primary keys to happiness.
- **We realize fully that happiness is a choice, one contingent not on external circumstances but on how we choose to think about those circumstances.** Such is the pathway to freedom, contentment, and sound mental health.
- **Cognizant of our base tendencies, we set a daily intention to embody generosity, patience, gratitude, compassion, and equanimity.**
- **We respond to life rather than react to it.**
- **We practice curiosity**, purposely making it a point to regularly take note of and appreciate life's many small wonders.

“Even the first few moments of genuine mindfulness are a turning point in our lives, because we realize, perhaps for the first time, that the mind can be trained, can be understood, can be liberated. We get glimpses of something beyond our ordinary, conventional reality.”

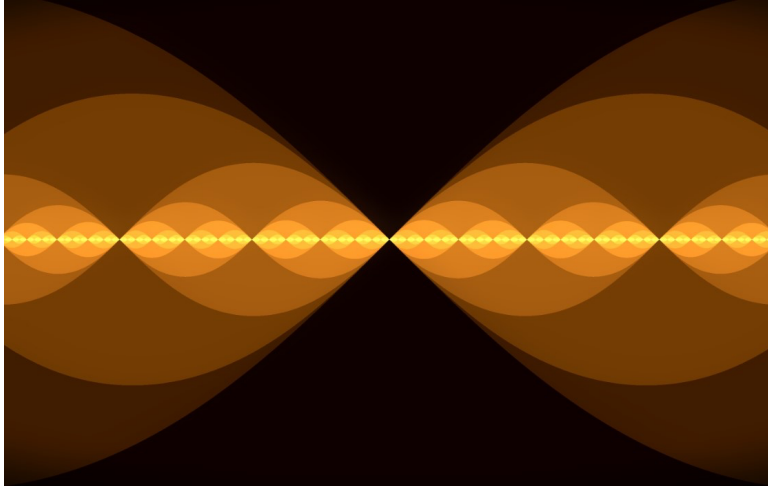
Joseph Goldstein

If being mindful sounds like a better way to live a life, then welcome, you've come to the right spot! Let's begin our mindful journey together!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

MINDFULNESS: THE BASICS



Chapter 1: WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

mind-less: *adj.* 1. without intelligence, senseless. 2. unmindful, careless.

mind-ful: *adj.* 1. attentive. 2. careful.

mind-ful-ness: *noun.*

1. Non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, senses, and bodily sensations.
2. Accepting with equanimity whatever life presents.
3. Focusing on the present moment and not the past or the future.
4. Purposely taking notice of the world around you, particularly its simplest moments.
5. Choosing to respond to life in a calm, compassionate, considered manner rather than reacting to it unthinkingly, unconsciously, and habitually.

Here is a rough depiction of some of the differences between being mindless versus being mindful.

	Brain "Temperature"	Thinking "Tachometer"	Brain Locus	Outward Persona
MINDLESS	Hot ('hot headed')	All revved up	Amygdala	Reactive, harsh, unpleasant, anxious, fearful, tunnel vision, self-centered, uptight
MINDFUL	Cool	Slow idle	Prefrontal cortex	Wisely responsive, calm, compassionate, understanding, relaxed, creative, light-hearted

Mindfulness practice holds the promise of helping you become a better person, a happier person, and one who leads a fuller, richer life without any change in circumstance.

While the practice of mindfulness consists of basic principles and teachings, there is no dogma that must be taken on faith. Rather, it is an experiential philosophy that says, "*Try these things and see if they work for you.*"

While I will provide you with the principles and teachings, it falls on you, through application, to prove its benefits to yourself. I can proverbially "lead you to the water" but the drinking part, that's up to you!

"Everyone knows that it takes time and perseverance to master an art, a sport, a language, or any other discipline. Why should it not be the same with training the mind?"

It is a worthwhile adventure. We are not talking about acquiring some ordinary ability, but rather about a new way of being that will determine the quality of our entire life."

Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and author of "[Why Meditate?](#)"

In basic terms, mindfulness can be summarized using the acronym "**CAAL**":

- **C**oncentration.
- **A**wareness.
- **A**cceptance.
- **L**ove

Concentration

Concentration is the practice of directing your attention to where *you* want it rather than following unconsciously to wherever your wandering, unobserved mind takes you. In short, a wandering mind is problematic to leading a peaceful life.

Developing the skill of concentration is achieved through formal meditation practice coupled with informal mindfulness techniques deployed throughout one's day.

Awareness

If our goal is to lead a peaceful life it helps to remain aware of the following:

1. **Awareness of the present moment** and choosing to preferentially reside there (versus our tendency to dwell on our unchangeable past or fret about an unknowable future).
2. **Awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations.** These are used as an early-warning system to alert us when our wisdom is going off-line.
3. **Awareness of one of the primary causes of suffering** - resisting reality.

4. **Awareness of impermanence**, the truism that nothing stays the same, that everything is in constant flux. To resist impermanence is to invite suffering.
5. **Awareness of the many factors impacting human behaviour**. Armed with this knowledge we just naturally adopt universal compassion as our credo.
6. **Awareness of our highest intentions**, including to bring peace and goodwill into the world.
7. **Awareness of a broader perspective on life**. This helps us stop taking life, and ourselves, so seriously.
8. **Awareness of our interdependence and interconnectedness with others** and, ultimately, with everything in the universe. Doing so helps overcome our self-absorbed, self-centred egoism.

Acceptance

Acceptance means that we adopt the attitude that whatever life brings our way, we're okay with it, it's all manageable. By doing so we drop all the usual drama and, instead, just deal with each situation matter-of-factly; we practice equanimity.

Love

Universal love is an essential component of mindfulness, because if you're harboring anger, jealousy, envy, greed, selfishness, impatience or any of the other base traits of humanity, you cannot be mindful - these two states of mind are like oil and water.

Love is choosing to live your life with compassion, generosity, understanding, and goodwill toward *everyone* you encounter, without exception (see the "Compassion" series of essays for why this is the right thing to do).

"In the practice of mindfulness, the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgments and interpretations have to be suspended or, if they occur, just registered and dropped. The whole process is a way of coming back into the present moment, of standing in the here and now, without getting swept away by the tides of distracting thoughts."

Bhikkhu Bodhi, Buddhist monk

"Mindfulness is the presence of mind, the quality of awareness, often described as "bare attention".

Joseph Goldstein, "Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening"

Mindful Moments: Some examples

To help make the concept of mindfulness a bit more concrete, let's look at some examples of mindful moments:

- You are walking through the woods trying to clear your head over an argument you just had with your parents. You regret the hurtful things you said to them out of anger and now are worrying about your future relationship with them. Your mind turns the past and future over and over in an endless loop. Then, suddenly, a clearing opens up in the woods and there, in the vast expanse right in front of you, is the most amazing sunset you've ever seen, and you are instantly awestruck. At that moment, all those negative thoughts fall away and your entire world closes down to just that experience. You have left the past and the future and, once again, are living fully in the present moment - you are mindful.

In this more peaceful state, you see the wise path forward with your parents and commit to calling them when you get home. You enjoy the rest of your woodland stroll.

- You are taking a shower after two hours of tiring, sweaty yard work and your senses open up completely to the experience - the warm water cascading over your body, the scent of the lathered soap, the sound of the drops hitting the shower walls, the blurring of your sight as the water runs down your face, and the sweet taste of the water as you take small sips to quench your thirst. At that moment, that shower is your entire world - you are being mindful!
- You are sitting comfortably in your backyard on a mild spring day taking in the warmth, the sound of the birds in the trees around you, and the scent of flowers just coming into bloom. Suddenly, your yard-obsessed neighbour fires up his gas-powered beast of a lawnmower, jolting you out of your serenity. A surge of judgmental anger takes hold of your being and thoughts of what you'd like to do to him race through your mind. Then, you notice these unhelpful feelings and choose to pause, breathe, slow down your mind, and relax. You laugh at yourself for your habitual reaction to life's unpleasant moments and remind yourself, once again, that pleasant and unpleasant are both just part of life. In your now-mindful state you smile and wave good-naturedly to your neighbour, closing your eyes and resting as you wait patiently for him to complete his chore.
- You are playing your favourite sport and a crucial moment arises requiring your total focus. Suddenly, conscious awareness of the spectators drops away, all goes calm and quiet, all sensory input ceases, and your entire world narrows to the task at hand - you are "in the zone" in sports parlance and all worldly matters cease to exist for you at that moment. Welcome to mindfulness!

- You are focused on an important report for your manager that is due tomorrow, trying to get the words just right. Suddenly, an email notification pops up on your screen and part of your mind starts wondering what it's about. Then, your phone rings and rings and rings, sounding urgent, and another part of your mind begins making up stories about who may be needing you. And then a colleague interrupts you to ask a question and suddenly you feel anxious and stressed - there's just too much going on. And then you realize that your mind is scattered. You choose to turn off your email notifications, you put your phone on do-not-disturb, and you advise your colleagues that you need two hours of quiet time. Your mind settles and you're able to focus productively on just the task at hand - you've chosen to be mindful.
- Your friend comes to you in a frantic state. You drop what you are doing, your full attention turns to her, and you just listen - no mental commentary, no judging, no thinking about what you're going to say - you just listen, thus being mindfully attentive to your friend's needs.
- Your spouse speaks to you in a harsh, aggressive manner over something he feels you should have done. You feel unjustly accused and really hurt. But in that moment, you become aware of your body tensing, your blood boiling, your jaw clenching, and your racing mind - and you pause, slow everything down, and breathe. Rather than judging his outburst as childish and lashing out at him, your heart feels compassion because you know this isn't his true self talking. You simply let him say his piece and resolve to speak to him later once he's calmed down and both of you are more receptive to a wiser, heartfelt discussion about the issue. Responding with compassion and wisdom, rather than reacting in our habitual, unthinking way, you've chosen the path of mindfulness.
- You are driving to work along the same seemingly-boring and overly-familiar route you have for the past six years, only today you have your four-year-old grandchild with you and she begins asking you questions about what she's seeing and hearing. Suddenly, through her eyes, you begin noticing new things about that "boring" route that you'd never really noticed before. The drive isn't boring this time - in fact, it's rather pleasant and interesting! Welcome to mindfulness practice!

What we can glean from these examples is that you are being mindful when:

- *Your attention is focused on what is happening at this present moment.*
- *You choose not to dwell on an unchangeable past or fret about an unknowable future.*
- *You focus on one task at a time and give it your undivided attention.*
- *You experience life directly through your senses minus commentary, opinions, or judgments.*

- *You choose to respond to life's challenges and frustrations with compassion rather than reacting unthinkingly and automatically with ego-centric aggression.*
- *Through practice you develop moment-to-moment awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations and use these as your guide to pause before being taken over by our often-unhelpful instinctual reactions to the things in life we don't like. Instead, we learn to create a wee bit of space to allow us to choose a path of calm wisdom.*

While mindfulness practice can't make the unpleasant aspects of life disappear, it can provide you with the tools to live a life of peace amidst life's inevitable squalls.

Without question, implementing a daily mindfulness practice has made my life materially better - one of peaceful contentment regardless of circumstance. And I know it can do the same for you.

Warmest wishes,

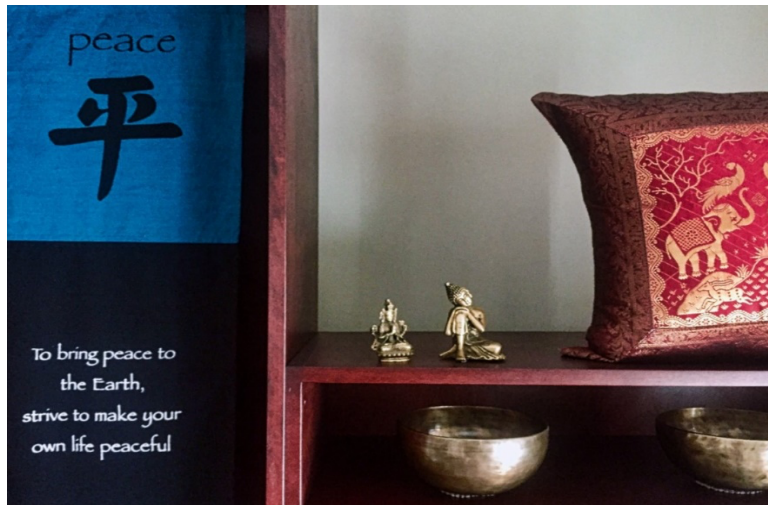
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“The teachings others can give you are to show you the path, but that isn’t real knowledge. When people genuinely meet the dharma (i.e. the Buddha’s teachings), they realize it directly within themselves.

So, the Buddha said that he is merely the one who shows the way. In teaching us, he is not accomplishing the way for us. It is not so easy as that. It’s like someone who sells us a plow to till the fields. He isn’t going to do the plowing for us. We have to do that ourselves.

Teachings can be most profound, but those who listen may not understand. Never mind. Don’t be perplexed over profundity or lack of it. Just do the practice wholeheartedly and you can arrive at real understanding – it will bring you to the place the teachings talk about.”

Ajahn Chah, Buddhist monk, [Tricycle magazine](#)



Chapter 2: MENTAL BENEFITS OF BEING MINDFUL

In Chapter 1 we learned what it means to be mindful. But you may be asking yourself, "Okay, so what's the big deal? Why should we care if we're being mindful or not?"

That's a fair question, because becoming mindful (just like learning any new skill) will require a modicum of effort, commitment, and practice on your part. Good things rarely come easy, so there had better be a payoff in the end.

And there is, because I've personally experienced it.

The Promise of leading a mindful life

Based on my own personal experience (and confirmed by untold others), here are some of the benefits of instituting a daily mindfulness practice:

1. Your [stress](#) and anxiety levels will decrease materially.
2. Pointless moments spent dwelling on past regrets or future worries will steadily diminish.
3. You will be calmer, more at peace, and begin to live life with an ease of being.
4. You will notice yourself becoming less ruffled by life's challenges and petty annoyances.
5. Your life will feel less rushed (even if filled with much activity).
6. You will experience less conflict with others and whatever conflict does arise, you will handle it with greater grace, ease, and wisdom.
7. You will be less judgmental, of yourself and others.
8. You will be more compassionate, understanding, and considerate of others.
9. You will be more generous.
10. You will be more patient.
11. You will be more accepting of whatever life brings your way.
12. You will be more easy-going, more able to lighten up and start taking life less seriously.

13. You will be more comfortable in your own skin, less egotistic, more able to laugh at yourself, more confident about who you are as a person (warts and all), and less affected by what other people think of you.
14. You will *respond* to life's challenges with wisdom rather than *react* to them habitually and unthinkingly.
15. Your external circumstances will no longer dictate whether you are happy or sad.
16. You will experience greater joy, most noticeably from the simplest of things.
17. You will notice and sense more and, in doing so, find that the world becomes more interesting.
18. The feeling of boredom will virtually disappear from your life.
19. Your ability to focus on the task at hand will increase.

In short, the promise of mindfulness practice is to help us become better people and to lead happier, [healthier](#) lives. This is why it's worth bothering about.

Well, if it's this good, why doesn't everyone choose mindfulness?

I believe there are a number of reasons most people do not practice mindfulness:

1. While mindfulness is steadily making its way into popular culture, most people remain unaware of it.
2. Mindfulness is not yet taught in most of our schools.
3. Most people lead such hectic lives that, even with the best of intentions, making room for mindfulness practice just doesn't happen.
4. Even with full awareness of mindfulness and its benefits, becoming a mindful individual requires a long-term commitment. Given society's short attention span, this is a tall order for most people.
5. Becoming mindful also requires quiet reflection, particularly through daily meditation sessions. In this manner the teachings become an integral part of who you are. However, society's frantic pace is antithetical to making time for moments of quiet reflection.
6. Our evolutionary inheritance biases us toward being *mindless* (see the essay, "*Mindless by Design*").
7. Tragically, being mindless is our cultural norm and so seems, well, normal; just the way life is, with no reason to give a moment's thought that there's perhaps a different way - a better way - to lead a life.

Not Mindful? Then You're Mindless

The opposite of being mindful is to be mindless.

To get a feel for what this means, take a moment to re-read the nineteen Promises of Mindfulness listed above but, this time, *mentally make each one into its exact opposite*.

For example, point number one becomes: "Your stress and anxiety levels will *increase* materially" - if you are mindless.

Take some time to observe those around you and ask yourself if this exercise doesn't paint a pretty fair picture of most people's lives - perhaps even your own! Needless to say, this is not a healthy way to get through life.

This is why practicing mindfulness is so important; it provides us with the means to counter our base human tendencies and become better, happier, wiser people.

"Our minds are reactive: liking and disliking, judging and comparing, clinging and condemning. As long as we're identified with these judgments and preferences ... our minds are continually thrown out of balance, caught in a tiring whirlwind of reactivity.

It is through the power of mindfulness that we can come to a place of balance and rest. Mindfulness is that quality of attention which notices without choosing, without preference; it is a choiceless awareness."

Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, "[Seeking the Heart of Wisdom](#)"

Mindfulness benefits

In the previous article this is how we defined mindfulness:

mind-ful-ness: *noun*. 1. on purpose, non-judgmental, moment-to-moment awareness of your thoughts, feelings, senses, and bodily sensations. 2. being focused on, and accepting with equanimity, whatever you are experiencing in the present moment. 3. focusing on the present moment and not dwelling on the past or the future. 4. purposely noticing and being curious about the world around you. 5. choosing wise, compassionate behaviour rather than reacting mindlessly.

Let's explore the rationale behind some of these components:

1. You choose to focus your attention on what is happening at this present moment.

If your mind isn't focused on the present moment then you've got a wandering mind or, more colourfully, a monkey mind. In such a state, your thoughts are scattered and you carry on an incessant monologue with yourself. To some extent the only difference between you and the "crazy" guy who talks to himself is that you have the good sense to keep your mouth shut!

Why this mode of thinking is unhealthy is that a mind not focused on the present moment is an anxious, unhappy mind.

This was confirmed by an [interesting study](#) done by two Harvard psychologists who discovered that we are not thinking about what we are doing almost half the time - our thoughts are in the past or in the future - *not in the present moment*.

While interesting in itself, their key finding was that ***we are happiest when we are thinking about what we are doing***. This means we are happiest when we are being mindful.

Of course, if we're spending half our time not thinking about what we're actually doing, then we are effectively cutting our lifetime in half! Think about it; time spent in the past or future or simply zoned out in semi-conscious auto-pilot is time un-lived. Imagine being able to double your actual lived life *simply by focusing on the present moment!* This is the power of mindfulness.

2. **You choose not to dwell on an unchangeable past or fret about an unknowable future.**

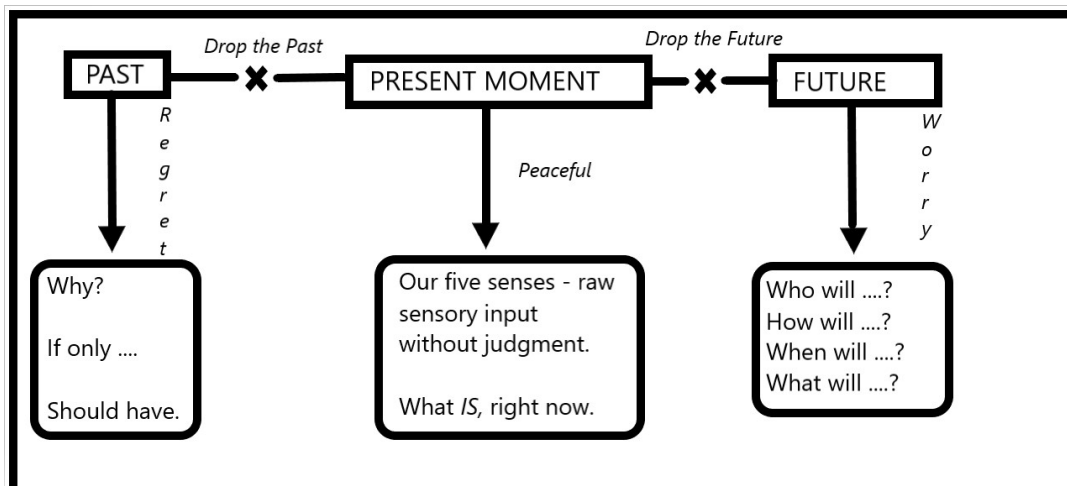
The only moment we get to experience is the present moment. Dwelling on the past just causes angst because we can't do anything about it. The only thing we can do about past regrets is to take responsibility and make things right in the present moment.

Similarly, fussing over the future just leads to stress and anxiety because the future is unknowable and not actionable - it can only be dealt with when it becomes the present.

And the plain truth is that **the future inevitably turns out to be far better than we feared**. This is delightfully captured in a quote from the French Renaissance philosopher, Michel de Montaigne (1533 - 1592):

"My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened."

Of course, avoiding thinking about the future doesn't mean we don't plan for it. But planning is obviously a very different type of thinking than the scattered, worried thoughts we have when dreading some future situation.



3. **You focus on one task at a time and give it your undivided attention.**

This is simply a different way of phrasing the first component of mindfulness - to focus your attention on what is happening at this present moment.

I break it out separately because we live in a world where multi-tasking has become the pernicious norm. Tragically, it is also the cause of needless anxiety and stress.

In the article, "[The Perils of Multitasking](#)", from Psychology Today we learn that multi-tasking:

- Interferes with learning.
- Reduces productivity.
- Promotes stress and fatigue.
- Becomes addictive and chronic through use.
- Leads to a short attention span.
- Reduces working memory capacity.

And the stated solution to this litany of woes? To quote the article, "To use mental discipline to condition good attentiveness and thinking habits". In other words, to practice mindfulness!

4. **You experience life directly through your senses.**

To become aware of your body's sensory inputs - hearing, seeing, feeling, etc. - you have to pay attention.

Living life directly through your senses means actually *noticing* life as it unfolds: you make it your practice to take note of your coffee's aroma, to consciously hear the chickadees chirping on the branch outside your window, and to feel the cool evening breeze against your exposed skin.

Living life in this manner forces us into the present moment, which is when we're happiest. And it also gives us the opportunity to take in and treasure the richness of our world.

5. **You choose to live life with the renewed curiosity of a child instead of the jaded familiarity and disinterest of an adult. You consciously try to notice things and look for the fine details in the familiar as if experiencing them for the first time.**

Jaded familiarity and disinterest put us into auto-pilot mode, living out our life without actually consciously experiencing much of it.

But life is way too precious to waste in such a zoned-out state of mind where all we tend to experience is our old tired thoughts and judgmental commentary.

Just as with living life directly through our senses, active curiosity and noticing keep us in the present moment and help us treasure life's simplest moments. We become grateful simply for being alive and having the opportunity to take in all of life's many wonders.

Think of it this way - how precious would your "boring" commute to work be if you knew that by day's end you were going to lose your ability to see and hear? How beautiful would the sky seem that day? How precious the sound of a passing jet? The answer is obvious.

6. You choose to respond to life's challenges and frustrations with compassion rather than reacting unthinkingly and automatically with ego-centric aggression.

Simply put, getting upset over life's unpleasant moments is a complete and utter waste of time. It achieves nothing of value but does much harm:

- Your mental and physical health is compromised (see the essay, "*Stress – Its Science & Management*").
- You become a decidedly unpleasant menace to those around you.

Better to accept that whatever comes your way is simply part of life. Then just deal with it, with equanimity and in a matter-of-fact, calm manner because:

1. Remaining calm permits your wisdom to come to the fore. In an agitated state you are thinking with the emotionally-reactive part of your brain (i.e. your amygdala). In such a state your resulting words and actions will inevitably be neither helpful nor wise.
2. You do no damage to your mental and physical well-being.
3. You do no harm, mentally or physically, to those around you.
4. You make the world a better place, contributing to its peace rather than its aggression.

7. Through practice you develop moment-to-moment awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations and you use them as your guide to choosing the path of wisdom.

One of the greatest gifts I have received through mindfulness practice is a greater ability to sense, in the moment, when my wisdom is going off-line.

The blizzard of negative thoughts, the furrowed brow, tensed jaw, flushed face, clenched fists, the hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach, and the tightness in my chest all shout out their warning: STOP!! DO NOT PROCEED!!

These are my cues to immediately pause, breathe, relax my body, and slow down my thinking. Only then is it prudent for me to speak or act because, if I proceed in an agitated state, the outcome will *not* be one I look back at with pride.

Mindfulness - my only regret

When it comes to mindfulness, my only regret is that no one told me about it in my youth. So much needless, useless, silly drama could have been avoided.

This now serves as my primary motivation to spread the gospel, so to speak, so that others may avoid my pointless moments of drama and, in doing so, live fuller, richer, happier lives.

You would be doing me a great favour were you to bring my blog to the attention of friends and family, and I thank you for doing so.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 3: MINDLESS BY DESIGN

Do you see yourself as being a pretty good person? Of course you do - most everyone does - and is.

So why do we fall short of our best intentions so often?

The unfortunate truth is that *we are not designed to be mindful* - we have been dealt an evolutionary hand that inclines us to be *mindless*.

Fortunately, this does not mean we're *destined* to always act in a mindless manner. *By being aware of this hand we've been dealt we can take steps to minimize its unhelpful tendencies.*

Stepping Into the Shoes of a Neanderthal

To help understand these evolutionary influences, let's consider what would have been important for the survival of our Neanderthal forebears:

Trait #1: The ability to sense potential danger

Back at the dawn of civilization when life-threatening danger was an existential risk, it would have been safer to judge a situation harshly and be wrong than to let down your guard and be wrong.

So, with this as our inherited inclination, we tend to be judgmental:

- We tend to judge others' behaviour and, with some frequency, find it wanting because it differs from how we would behave in the same situation. We tend to maintain a running internal dialogue about how others behave, dress, eat, drive - all in an effort to protect our deeply-held views of how the world should work.
- We're also self-critical. Why? Because we fear being judged by others and having them find *us* wanting. We desperately want to fit in and be accepted. This is evidenced by our near-universal fear of public speaking, a prime example of not wanting to be seen as "flawed" in front of others. In our own eyes we're often not pretty enough, or tall enough, or smart enough, or good enough, or
- We're also prone to zeroing in on the "bad" things in our life rather than focusing on the "good" things. For example, we're vacationing at a beautiful Caribbean resort and what do we fixate on? That the waiter is too slow bringing us our drinks, or that it's too hot, or too cold, or too windy. We are cursed with what is known as a '[negativity bias](#)', the tendency to focus on the bad rather than on the good.
- When we think about the future, we're often anxious, fretting over what could go wrong. And despite experience to the contrary, we fail to learn that the future tends to turn out just fine and that we were fully up to its challenge.

So, a mechanism that kept our ancestors safe from life-threatening danger now inclines us to be **judgmental**.

Trait #2: The ability to quickly react to and flee from potential danger.

When faced with potentially life-threatening danger it would have been essential to *react immediately*. This would not be the time to carefully ponder the wisest way forward.

As a result, all animals (including us humans) developed the ability to ***react unthinkingly, habitually, and automatically***. This is our stress response - the fight-flight-freeze mechanism - driven by one of the oldest parts of our brain, the amygdala. While quick, the amygdala is decidedly not wise.

To be wise we need to access the newest part of our brain - the pre-frontal cortex (PFC), responsible for our executive functioning (emotional control, impulse control, and creativity).

Unfortunately, when we are upset (even by the most trivial of circumstances) our PFC goes off-line and we lose access to our wisdom - just when we need it most. And what do we do when this happens? *We think and act mindlessly*.

So, once again, that which helped keep our ancient ancestors alive now ***inclines us to be unwise, reactive individuals*** which results in some of our most cringe-inducing behavior and stupefyingly-bad decisions.

The good news is that there are tell-tale signs when our stress response is about to take our wisdom off-line and turn us into the equivalent of Neanderthals. We experience:

- a furrowed brow
- downturned, pursed lips
- a faster heart beat
- a tightening of the muscles, especially the jaw
- a dry mouth
- faster, shallower breathing
- an empty feeling in the gut

We need to become sensitized to these sensations and, when they occur, **use them as our signal to not continue down that path.**

Specifically, we should pause, breathe slowly and deeply, smile, relax our tight muscles, and slow down our thinking.

Doing so activates our calming parasympathetic nervous system, shuts down the amygdala, and helps us access our PFC and its inherent wisdom.

In a calmer, clearer state of mind, we choose to ***respond to life*** rather than ***react to it unthinkingly.***

Trait #3: **Protecting our own**

From an evolutionary standpoint, passing one's genes on to the next generation is the prime directive. How is this best accomplished? By being selfish - looking after yourself first, then those who share most of your genes, and then those who would step forward to raise your offspring should you die prematurely. In other words, look out for Number One, then relatives, then friends.

Of course, this is a description of being self-centred and indifferent toward those you don't know. Little surprise that neither of these traits is compatible with being mindful.

As confirmation of these tendencies one interesting [study](#) ran a variation of the [Trolley problem](#) the essence of which is to force a participant to decide whether to sacrifice one individual for the sake of saving multiple others.

Given what we now know, it should come as no surprise that test participants were ***more willing to sacrifice non-relatives.*** In addition, ***the closer the relation, the less likely they were to sacrifice that person*** for the survival of multiple "others".

Aware of our tendency to be **self-centered, selfish, and nepotistic** we can instead foster the opposite traits - to be generous, considerate, kind, thoughtful, caring, and helpful - *toward everyone* – not just those within our limited charmed circle.

Trait #4: **The ability to automate repeated tasks**

We have a built-in mechanism that turns repeated actions over to the subconscious part of our brain (e.g. learning to type, learning to play a musical instrument, or learning to play a new sport).

This is obviously a very useful system as it makes us more efficient at such tasks. Imagine a caveman having to think about each individual muscle movement involved in tossing a spear accurately at a moving target - starvation would quickly result.

So, through practice, this automating system makes repetitive tasks easy, requiring near-zero conscious thinking.

However, problems arise when we cede too much of our life to this automatic mode; we fail to see the roses, let alone stop to smell them. Much of life becomes invisible to us.

We've all experienced this - we're driving to work along the same route we've used the past umpteen years. Being repetitive, the task of negotiating the journey is handed off to our subconscious and under the guidance of this automated system we arrive safely at our office *but without any real recollection of the terrain we've just traversed.*

The sunny day, scudding clouds, passing birds, interesting people, beautiful foliage, while in full view are, for all intents and purposes, invisible to us.

Instead, we're lost in our little thoughts of the past, the future, or spaced out in utter fantasy (how often do we uselessly replay past conversations or do imaginary run-throughs of future ones).

If we are not careful - if we are not mindful - ***much of our life is lost in the trance of automated behaviour.***

In a life spanning 90 years we are, in effect, dead at 50 having lived much of our life only marginally aware of our surroundings - *only marginally aware of what is actually happening in each moment lived.*

Trait #5: The drive to do, achieve, and acquire

It has been surmised that the unpleasant feeling we call boredom is actually the essential trait that drove our ancient ancestors to get off their collective butts and innovate for the survival of our species.

Think of it this way - any species for whom doing nothing all day felt totally fantastic - well, they were the ones quickly expunged from the evolutionary record.

So, while we take the act of "doing things" for granted, it nonetheless is still driven by biological nudges and impulses. In this instance, being the desire to relieve the unpleasant feeling of boredom.

In addition, we also inherited a system that makes us feel good when we are about to receive a reward (e.g. food, sex, or buying something we crave). In anticipation of a reward, we receive a hit of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that sends signals to the pleasure centres of our brain.

Put these two systems together - pain for not doing and pleasure for doing - and we are primed as a species to accomplish a great deal.

However, there is a dark side to all this doing and acquiring, this being that there is no logical end to it. We do, do, do, accomplish, accomplish, accomplish, and acquire, acquire, acquire *and yet still feel empty*.

Why? Because no matter how much we do, no matter how much we accomplish, and no matter how much we acquire, *it's never enough*.

As soon as we stop "doing", the unpleasantness comes back and our craving for another hit of pleasure sends us back for more - we become addicted to "doing".

It is this feeling of always falling short that lies at the heart of society's chronic anxiety, stress, and pervasive dissatisfaction with life - a sense that no matter how fast we go or how much we do, accomplish, or acquire, we never quite 'make it' in life; we are **chronically discontent**.

Our Evolutionary Inheritance: Mindlessness

So, these five traits, each one a part of our evolutionary inheritance, incline us to behave mindlessly:

- We are inclined to be critical and judgmental of others, ourselves, and situations we encounter.
- We pay greater heed to the few negative things in life rather than the many positive things.
- We react to life unthinkingly, habitually, and automatically.

- We are prone to be self-centred and selfish.
- We are lacking in compassion for those who are not our close relatives or friends.
- We cede much of our conscious awareness - much of our life - to automated actions.
- We are chronically discontent and, therefore, endure a never-ending cycle of doing, achieving, and acquiring.

Needless to say, this is not a great way to live a life.

"I began to wonder whether people were thinking at all. Decades of research later, I have found the answer is a resounding "NO". Mindlessness is pervasive. In fact, I believe virtually all of our problems - personal, interpersonal, professional, and societal - either directly or indirectly, stem from mindlessness."

Dr. Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University and author of "[Mindfulness](#)"

The Solution: Mindful Awareness

As mentioned earlier, biology is not destiny. We can take steps to ameliorate the negative aspects of these otherwise useful traits. How?

1. By acknowledging their existence.
2. By sensitizing ourselves to their negative side effects.
3. By altering our behavior when we sense they are about to influence us to act in a mindless manner.

Only by applying mindful awareness of our base tendencies can we save ourselves from wasting much of life in a fog of mindless behaviour.

Of course, we're only human, and so will inevitably fall short of our best intentions from time to time. However, that's why it's called mindfulness ***practice***. And, with dedicated practice, the frequency of our mindless moments diminishes.

Compassion - Not Judgment

As discussed in this essay, our inherited mindlessness is why we all need to extend compassion rather than anger toward those whose behavior we find offensive; ***because none of us chose our evolutionary inheritance and it's not our fault that we are inclined to be mindless.***

And the result of extending a compassion that recognizes the innocence of our human frailties? A kinder, gentler, fairer, more understanding, and more peaceful world for us all.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

APPLIED MINDFULNESS



Chapter 4: HOW TO BE MINDFUL

Fortunately, mindfulness is a life skill that can be learned by anyone. And you're going to get there much faster than I did because I'm going to let you in on all the mistakes I made on my own journey!

My personal Path to Mindfulness

What didn't work!

During my time at university, I could pretty much read the assigned textbook and pick up the required knowledge. I thought I could do the same with mindfulness - just casually read about it and, presto, I would become a mindful person.

Well, that approach failed miserably.

It soon became apparent that as long as things were going my way, I was fine. However, when challenged by life, all my bad traits still reared their ugly head.

So, despite having acquired a strong intellectual understanding of the core mindfulness teachings, when life didn't go my way, I immediately defaulted back to being judgmental, reactive, unthinking, lacking in compassion, Well, you get the picture - I was definitely *not* mindful!!

What worked!

Here are the steps that turned the corner for me in my quest for mindfulness:

1. I implemented a daily meditation practice

I belatedly discovered that my intellectual approach to mindfulness had been doomed to failure from the start because it did absolutely nothing to fix the root cause of my mindless behaviour - ***it didn't fix the structure of my brain.***

In very simplified terms, repeated behaviour builds super-highways in your brain's neuronal network. These highways become your go-to neuronal pathways. Each episode of mindless behaviour reinforces all the previous ones. Eventually you end up reacting mindlessly to every challenging situation you face, no matter how insignificant.

This is why we all tend to react to the world habitually, unthinkingly, and unconsciously - because this is what we have inadvertently trained our brains to do.

"What makes the Buddha's understanding of the mind so powerful is the recognition that because perceptions are conditioned by our mental habits, we can also train our perceptions in a way that supports happiness and freedom."

Joseph Goldstein, "[Mindfulness - A Practical Guide to Awakening](#)"

The question then is, how do we break this unhelpful cycle? And the answer? *Through a dedicated, daily meditation practice.*

While I was studying mindfulness, a number of the books I read suggested meditation. However, I routinely ignored those passages. Unfortunately, my short-sighted attitude was, *"Right, I'm going to start meditating! I don't think so!"* Meditation just struck me as so much New Age mumbo jumbo.

Well, it turns out I was dead wrong.

I simply cannot stress strongly enough that a daily meditation practice is absolutely essential to achieving mindfulness.

And the reason is this: ***without changing your brain's neurological wiring you're going to keep exhibiting the same old tired, predictable, unhelpful behaviour you've always exhibited.***

Numerous studies make it clear that regular meditation rewires your brain. It dampens the harsh, reactive part (i.e. the amygdala and related limbic system) while enhancing the wise part (i.e. the frontal cortex).

So, please don't make my mistake - start a meditation practice today!

2. *I regularly read about mindfulness*

As a personal financial advisor for thirty-three years, I read extensively about investing from expert sources, mainly academic journals. In doing so, I often came across the same teachings but presented in different ways, each one helping to deepen my understanding. In this manner the material became deeply ingrained in my mind.

My study of mindfulness followed the exact same path; repeated exposure led to deeper understanding. This process helped immeasurably to ingrain these teachings into who I now am - a more mindful individual.

To help you follow this same path I have provided a list of [suggested readings](#), all from highly-respected authors and presenters.

3. *I make quiet time to ponder what I read*

The profundity of mindfulness wisdom is not readily grasped through casual reading; it just isn't. It must be pondered. Setting aside time for quiet reflection of the teachings is essential.

Yes, I know, the thought of fitting yet another task into an already busy day may seem unrealistic. ***But life is always a case of prioritizing what really matters to us. Only you can weigh the importance of leading a more peaceful, contented life.***

4. *I sought out daily exposure to mindfulness wisdom*

In addition to daily reading, early in my exploration of mindfulness I also made use of the following three resources to provide a quick dose of daily wisdom:

- "[Arriving at Your Own Door - 108 Lessons in Mindfulness](#)", by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- "[The Power of Now - 50 Inspiration Cards](#)", by Eckhart Tolle
- "[The Four Agreements - 48 Cards](#)", by Don Miguel Ruiz

5. *I incorporated some quick and simple mindfulness practices into my daily routine*

When I talk about a "mindfulness practice" I am referring to two distinct parts:

1. A formal daily meditation practice.
2. Informal mindfulness practice. These techniques, some of which are outlined below, are quick and easy, designed to be incorporated into one's daily routine to help keep us mindful.

Informal Mindfulness Practices

Here are some quick and easy mindfulness practices you can use throughout your day or whenever you are feeling anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed:

1. **Download a mindful-moment reminder app to your cell phone.** An example is one called "[Mindful Me](#)" that can be set to chime on a frequency of your choosing. Each time it chimes simply stop whatever you're doing and take a short mindful break making use of one or more of the techniques outlined below.
2. **Take a 5-senses break.** Stop whatever you're doing and cycle through your senses - touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight - and focus briefly but intently on each one in turn.
3. **Use your non-dominant hand.** Unless you happen to be ambidextrous, briefly using your non-dominant hand to work on a physical task forces you out of auto-pilot and into the present moment because you suddenly have to focus intently on what you're doing.
4. **Take a ponder break.** Stop what you're doing and, using one of the wisdom-quote tools referenced above (e.g. "[The Power of Now - 50 Inspiration Cards](#)"), take a moment to ponder the wisdom presented. Doing so will bring you into the present moment and help to incorporate the wisdom deep into your brain.
5. **Keep mindfulness reminders around** such as a small Buddha figurine or a mindful computer screen-saver or [background image](#) - little things to periodically snap you out of your fog of thinking and back into the present moment.
6. **Periodically take a break and go into what I refer to as "photography mode",** looking for interesting photo opportunities. Rekindling the curiosity from your childhood in this manner takes you out of the confines of your tiny skull and into the wonders of the present moment. This is a wonderful exercise when you're stuck in a slow-moving grocery line or in traffic.
7. **Practice S.T.O.P. :** 1) **S**top whatever you are doing. 2) **T**ake a few slow, deep breaths. 3) **O**bserve any troubling thoughts, feelings, and emotions, becoming consciously aware of them and naming them ("I'm feeling anger", "I'm feeling frustration", etc.). Naming a feeling has been found to diminish its ill effect. 4) **P**roceed to do yourself a kindness; go for a brief stroll, grab a healthy snack, etc. This helpful exercise is nicely summarized by Dr. Elisha Goldstein in an [article](#) she wrote for [Mindful magazine](#).
8. **Before picking up the phone, answering an email, or leaving a return voice message, take two mindful breaths** and reaffirm your intention to be mindful and to embody compassion, understanding, peace, kindness, patience, and love - all integral components of what it means to be mindful. Your interaction will assuredly be better for having done so.
9. **Let the first minute of every meeting be one of silence.** Doing so helps calm participants' minds, essential to accessing the creativity, emotional control, and impulse control resident in the frontal cortex of the brain.
10. **Take a gratitude break.** Periodically pause whatever you're doing and reflect on all the things you are grateful for in your life. This practice brings us back into the present moment and helps overcome our [negativity bias](#).

11. **When doing a chore, focus your full attention on just doing the chore** because doing so keeps you in the present moment and so helps alleviate frustration and impatience. This runs counter to our norm which is to begrudge having to do the chore and so try to rush our way through it. But not only does this not make the chore go any faster, it also renders it totally unpleasant because our attention is focused on its unpleasant nature. Better to simply accept that chores are a necessary part of life and just do them, minus the drama.
12. **Go for a mindful stroll.** This is a form of walking meditation - you simply pay close attention to the physical sensations you feel in your feet as you walk. Doing so keeps you in the present moment and settles an over-active mind.
13. **Keep some of your favourite comics close at hand and, periodically, throughout your day, read a couple to yourself.** My personal favourites are Herman (by Jim Unger), Dilbert (by Scott Adams), and The Far Side (by Gary Larson). Doing so brings you into the present moment and helps you to lighten up and stop taking things so seriously.
14. **Wear a distinctive band on your finger or wrist** and each time you notice it, use it as a reminder to slow down and be mindful.
15. **Take a moment each day to practice a random act of kindness.** Grand gestures are not required here, just simple acts that let others know you care. They need not even know that you are their secret patron. Doing so gets you out of your tiny little world of self and into the broader, joyous world of caring for each other.
16. **Do a quick body scan.** Close your eyes and consciously turn your focus to each of the parts of your body in sequence, taking in the feeling of warmth or cool, tingling, the feel of your clothes against your skin, etc. This exercise, which takes only a minute or two, calms and focuses the mind and brings you back to the present moment.
17. **Practice mindful eating.** Whenever you're eating, focus all your attention on just eating, noting the appearance, aroma, taste, texture, and even the sound of what you are eating. Again, this practice keeps us in the present moment.
18. **Half a day a week, keep a tally of all the times you experience negative feelings and emotions.** This practice not only keeps you in the present moment by forcing you to stay alert to your feelings, it is also excellent practice for noticing when your wisdom is going off-line, which is each time you experience negative feelings and emotions! These are your cue to pause, slow down your thinking, breathe, laugh at yourself, accept reality with equanimity, and proceed with wisdom.
19. **Take a smile break.** Periodically throughout your day stop whatever it is you are doing, take a few slow, deep breaths, *and just smile*, physically or just in your mind. This practice brings you back into the present moment, improves your mood, and forces you to lighten up and stop taking yourself, and life in general, so darned seriously. The simple act of smiling, even if faked, has been found to release such beneficial hormones as dopamine (the 'feel-good' hormone), serotonin (calming), and endorphins (our body's natural pain killer).
20. **Practice colour awareness.** Choose a colour, any colour, and then for the next hour take note each time you encounter it as you go about your day. Doing so keeps you in the present moment and nurtures the habit of consciously noticing the world - to stop and smell the roses (or at least notice their colour)!

Some General Mindfulness Practices

In addition to the daily informal practices listed above, here are a handful of general practices that will also help you become, and remain, mindful!

1. **Slowwwwww dowwwwwwn!!!** Doing so not only reduces stress but also helps you make better decisions. How? By calming the reactive part of your brain (the amygdala, the locus of our fight, flight, freeze stress mechanism) and putting you back in touch with the wise part of your brain (the pre-frontal cortex, responsible for emotional control, impulse control, and creativity).
2. **Get regular exercise.** Not only will you feel better physically, but doing so has also been shown to improve mood, decrease anxiety and stress, and helps us sleep better.
3. And speaking of sleep, **get a good night's sleep!** Lack of sleep makes us irritable, anxious, emotionally reactive, easily frustrated, impulsive, prone to negative, repetitive thinking, and lacking in empathy.
4. **Seek out quiet solitude on a regular basis.** Give your brain a much-needed rest. Turn off your cellphone, put away your earbuds, slip into your hiking boots, and head out for a peaceful stroll through a nearby forest (or wherever you can get away from the rush and [noise of life](#)).
5. **Set up a quiet room in your home** dedicated to meditation or simply opportunities to be on your own, in peace and quiet, so you may close your eyes and decompress. I call mine my "Zen Den" – very peaceful!
6. **Learn to say "no"** to undesired requests of your time.
7. **Actively maintain simplicity in your life.** If you don't set boundaries on what's important to you, life will set them for you, and it's most unlikely you're going to be happy with its choices.
8. **Practice being content with doing nothing at all.** Turn an old saying on its head: "Don't just do something, sit there." In my own experience, this will not be easy, for we are a society of "doers", anxious if we encounter even a brief moment without an activity to fill the void. Our cellphones have become little more than adult pacifiers. What on earth did people do before the advent of such devices!? Relax more, perhaps? 😊

"Patience, Young Grasshopper"

Lastly, your journey on the path to mindfulness will be aided by nurturing these qualities - patience, non-judgment, and perseverance:

Patience & Non-Judgment

Am I always mindful? Of course not - I'm human!

So, as you practice mindfulness, **be patient and gentle with yourself when you periodically fall short of your best intentions**. Just acknowledge each stumble and then continue with your journey on the path of mindfulness.

Perseverance

As with acquiring any new skill, some stick-to-it-ness is essential.

"It's not hard to be mindful, it just takes training to remember to be mindful."

Joseph Goldstein

Should you need incentive from time to time, just keep in mind the reward for your practice: **a happier, more peaceful, better-lived life**.

How many undertakings can promise that? Not many.

"When Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT - based on mindfulness) was taught to abused teenagers in the Atlanta foster care system, simply being exposed to the class didn't have a significant effect. But the more the kids practised, the bigger the reduction in stress hormones and inflammation."

Jo Marchant, "[Cure - A Journey into the Science of Mind Over Body](#)"

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 5: MEDITATION: WHY BOTHER?

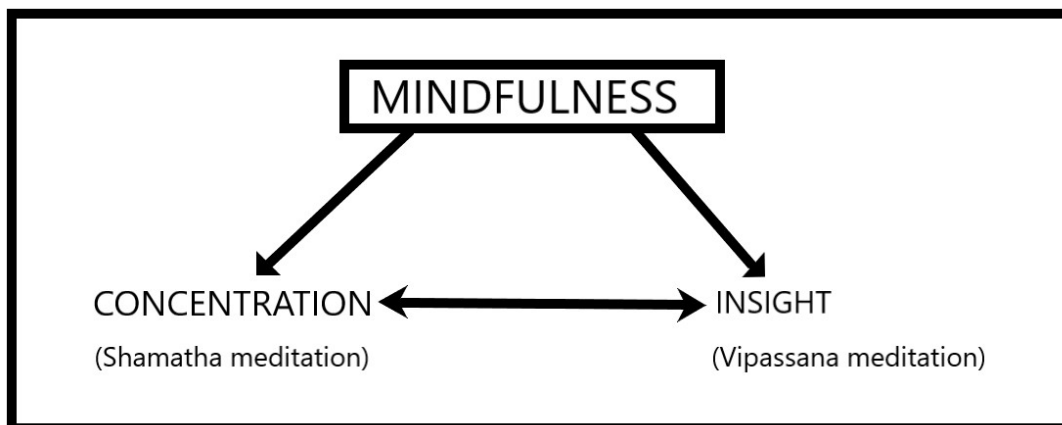
What is meditation?

As I outlined in Chapter 4 ("*How to be Mindful*"), mindfulness practice has two components:

1. **Informal practice** - techniques deployed throughout your day to maintain present-moment awareness.
2. **Formal practice** - which refers to meditation, this being the mind-training practice of focusing your attention (typically on your breath).

While there are many traditions of meditation, Zen likely being the most recognizable, there are two main goals of meditation that complement one another:

1. **Shamatha** meditation enhances your ability to concentrate, focus, and pay attention. It develops the inner calm necessary for practicing Vipassana meditation.
2. **Vipassana** meditation, also known as "insight meditation", involves contemplation of the [deeper truths of life](#) to help us become better people and lead happier, more peaceful, more compassionate lives.



Both forms of meditation are essential in that they support one another. Concentration on its own can be aloof to the sorrows of the world and so needs insight to nurture compassion.

On the other hand, acquiring insight is nigh impossible without first developing the ability to concentrate, to still the mind and direct your focus where *you* want it rather than where your mind involuntarily takes you.

“Without the steadiness of concentration, it is easy to get caught up in feelings, perceptions, and thoughts as they arise. Notice the profound difference between being aware of a thought and being lost in it. It is the power of concentration that keeps the defilements at bay.”

Joseph Goldstein, “Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening”

Why Meditate?

Here are [some of the benefits](#) of making a formal meditation practice part of your daily routine:

- It enhances attention and the ability to concentrate.
- It enhances emotional balance.
- It provides inner peace and psychological well-being.
- It increases our compassion, for ourselves and others.
- It counteracts our tendency to be self-centered and self-absorbed.
- It has been found to decrease anxiety, decrease the risk of depression, and decrease anger.
- It boosts the immune system and helps reduce blood pressure in those suffering from hypertension.
- It induces positive emotions.
- It teaches us how to deal with negative thoughts.
- It brings us back into the present moment with a mind that is clear, calm, and attentive.
- It gives our mind a much-needed rest, helping us to access the wise part of our brain, the frontal cortex, while quieting the reactive part of our brain, the amygdala.

In short, meditation is good for us mentally, physically, and inter-personally.

So, while informal mindfulness techniques are exceedingly helpful, they only get us part-way toward our goal of living a life filled with peace, joy, compassion, and wisdom. It takes a formal meditation practice to get us over the goal line, so to speak.

“Training the mind is crucial if we want to sharpen our attention, develop emotional balance and wisdom, and cultivate dedication to the welfare of others.”

Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and author of “Why Meditate?”

Starting a Meditation Practice

From all I have read and heard from others, my experience with starting a daily meditation practice is completely typical and one you are likely to experience as well:

- In the beginning I was completely unable to maintain a focus on my breath for longer than a few seconds. Over and over, I would catch myself thinking about work or things I had to do or friends and family or aches and pains.
- In embarrassingly short order I found myself squirming on the meditation chair, tense, tight and just wanting the session to end.
- I found myself skipping days, sometimes multiple days, between practice sessions. I lacked commitment to the practice.

"Whether your meditation session is enjoyable or irritating, easy or hard, the important thing is to persevere. If you get bored while meditating this is not the fault of meditation itself but is due to your lack of training."

Matthieu Ricard

The good news is that things do get easier and better!

After about a year I began to notice that my ability to focus had most definitely improved, as had my stamina on the meditation chair; my squirming and discomfort had steadily diminished.

So, just like sports training, push through the initial discomfort because you *will* come out the other side - trust me - and be all the better for it!

"Everyone knows that it takes time and perseverance to master an art, a sport, a language, or any other discipline. Why should it not be the same with training the mind?"

It is a worthwhile adventure. We are not talking about acquiring some ordinary ability, but rather about a new way of being that will determine the quality of our entire life."

Matthieu Ricard

How to Meditate - The Basics

I am going to assume you are sitting in a straight-backed chair for your meditation. I personally use my [meditation stool](#) or [meditation futon](#).

Here, then, are the basic steps:

1. Set a timer for how long you plan to meditate. For this I use an app called "[Insight Timer](#)", one of the most popular meditation sites. It offers both a free version as well as a premium paid version (which I personally subscribe to). Here you will find not just a timer but also thousands of spoken guided meditations, calming music to meditate to, as well as hundreds of short mindfulness courses.
2. Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor.
3. Your back should be straight but not tense. Keep your back away from the back of the chair.
4. Lay your hands palm up on top of your legs in a position that's comfortable, your elbows resting at your sides.
5. Tilt your head slightly downward and close your eyes.
6. Make any final adjustments to get comfortable.
7. Consciously relax all your muscles. Here I mentally envision all my body parts as being melting wax, softening gently under a comforting heat. A good opportunity to practice muscle softening is when you feel a sneeze coming on. Rather than giving in, practice relaxing your facial muscles. You'll soon be amazed at your ability to stifle a sneeze just through the conscious softening of your muscles!
8. Take two or three slow, deep breaths, inhaling to the count of four, holding for seven, and exhaling to the count of eight.
9. Begin breathing normally.
10. Focus your attention on where you most easily sense your breath. For most people this is near the tip of their nostrils, but could also be in your chest or belly. Wherever it is, maintain a gentle focus on that spot to sense your in-breaths and out-breaths. An excellent opportunity to practice focus is when you feel the urge to scratch an itch during a meditation session. Rather than giving in, re-double your focus on the breath and see if the itch doesn't just go away all on its own, this through re-direction of your attention to where *you* want it.
11. If it helps maintain focus, mentally count your in-breaths and out-breaths, counting to ten and then starting over. Alternatively, mentally repeat the words "Peace" for the in-breath and "Calm" for the out-breath. As you gain experience you will likely find you no longer need these aids to maintain focus.
12. Whenever you notice that your focus has wandered, just gently bring it back. With practice you will experience less wandering and greater ability to remain focused. This is actually one of the goals of meditation - to be able to turn your mind to where *you* want rather than to where *it* wants to take you!
13. When the timer goes, slowly and gently move your fingers and toes, breathe deeply, stretch, and open your eyes.

Variations on Meditation Practice

Here are instructions for doing a few of the better-known meditation practices:

Body-Scan Meditation (*shamatha*)

This meditation helps to develop your ability to maintain focused attention and awareness. It also serves to bring you firmly into the present moment.

Begin by following steps 1 through 9 as outlined above.

Starting with the small toe of your right foot, turn your attention for a few moments to any physical sensations there - tingling, pressure, warmth, etc. In addition, mentally soften the muscles of that toe just that little bit more.

Gradually turn your attention to each part of your body in turn and simply repeat this process.

Difficult Emotions Meditation (*vipassana*)

This meditation helps you deal with difficult situations and to dissipate troubling thoughts.

Follow steps 1 through 10 above.

If you are going through a difficult time it is a virtual certainty that your mind will soon wander away from your breath and latch on to your troubles.

When it does, determine the feelings that underlie these troubles - anger, frustration, fear, envy, embarrassment - whatever they may be.

Once determined, call the feelings out by mentally naming them. For example, if feeling afraid, gently repeat to yourself, "I am feeling afraid" or "Hello again fear". By bringing negative feelings into conscious awareness, by facing them head on, they will gradually dissipate.

To speed their departure, soften those parts of your body that are feeling tense or tight. Because body and mind are closely linked, relaxing the body automatically relaxes the mind, and vice versa.

Once the negative thoughts and feelings have softened, simply return your focus back to your breath.

If the negative feelings return, repeat the process, remembering to be gentle and compassionate with yourself the entire time.

Loving Kindness Meditation (*vipassana*)

This meditation helps to enhance your compassion for others.

Once again follow steps 1 through 9 above.

Starting with yourself in mind, mentally repeat these phrases to yourself:

*May I be happy and content
May I be healthy in mind, body, and spirit
May I be safe from mental and physical harm
May I have ease of being*

Next, repeat these phrases with a loved one in mind.

*May she be happy and content
May she be healthy in mind, body, and spirit
May she be safe from mental and physical harm
May she have ease of being*

In succession, repeat these same wishes while envisioning a close friend, then someone you are indifferent about, and finally someone you find difficult.

When you have completed this cycle, repeat the phrases one last time to take in all living beings everywhere.

*May all living beings be happy and content
May all living beings be healthy in mind, body, and spirit
May all living beings be safe from mental and physical harm
May all living beings have ease of being*

Now, you may be asking yourself, "*Why would I want to extend well wishes to someone I despise*"? For these reasons:

1. If difficult people were happy, healthy, safe, and felt an ease of being, they would cease being difficult people.
2. People don't choose to be difficult. It is only through their ignorance that they remain so. Scratch the surface and you will find an individual just like you, someone who wants the same things in life that you do - to be happy, healthy, safe, and free of worries.
3. As discussed in Chapter 16 ("*Selflessness – A Wiser Path Through Life*"), Buddhist philosophy teaches that "I", "Me", and "Mine" are simply mental constructs that we mistake for reality. In our ignorance of this, we create needless discord between ourselves and others.

Is sending good wishes to those you despise likely to have a discernible impact on them? Probably not. But it certainly has a positive impact on you for having done so - the tightness you feel every time you encounter them softens. This in itself is no small achievement and, if sensed by that person, may indeed help produce a softening in them as well. There's certainly no downside to this practice and it most definitely beats the alternative.

“Meditation will start to clarify your natural ethical sense. If you take up meditation with any degree of seriousness, you will realize that meditating regularly becomes more and more incompatible with acting in ways that harm others or yourself.”

Subhadramati, [“Not About Being Good – A Practical Guide to Buddhist Ethics”](#)

Tonglen Meditation (*vipassana*)

This meditation, similar to Loving Kindness, helps you to deal with difficult situations and enhance your compassion for others.

Once again, repeat steps 1 through 10.

Once settled, contemplate all those who are suffering just as you are, perhaps even more.

On each subsequent in-breath, imagine you are breathing in, from all parts of your body, the totality of their pain - all of it. Sense the heaviness, darkness, and heat of their suffering as your body breathes it all in.

Then, on the out-breath, imagine you are sending out to them (and to yourself) an ease of being and relief from suffering - breathing in others' troubles and breathing out relief. While doing so imagine a feeling of lightness, brightness, and cool accompanying each out-breath.

Wisdom Contemplation (*vipassana*)

This meditation reinforces key mindfulness teachings such that, with repetition, they become inculcated into your very being.

This is my favorite meditation, one I do almost every morning. Reflecting on the core teachings of mindfulness helps point me in the direction of peace and goodwill.

Again, follow steps 1 through 9 above, then observe the routine outlined in Chapter 10 (“Nurturing Optimal Mental Health”).

Sound Meditation (*shamatha*)

This meditation strengthens your ability to focus your attention and helps bring you back into the present moment.

Again, follow steps 1 through 9 above. Then turn your attention to any and all sounds around you. Notice their pitch, loudness, and duration.

Make a point to not label them as good or bad or to judge them in any way; simply listen intently.

Chocolate Meditation (*shamatha*)

This meditation is a practice in mindful eating and also serves to enhance conscious awareness of your senses. It's also fun and tastes great!

In turn, consciously engage each one of your senses as you *slowly* (!!!) go through the process of eating a piece of chocolate:

- *Touch* - how does it feel in your hands?
- *Sight* - notice everything about it; colour, texture, shape.
- *Aroma* - take in all its many essences.
- *Sound* - what sound does it make when you break a piece off?
- *Taste* - there are over 300 compounds in chocolate; how many can you sense?

Next post: "Weight Watcher's Meditation" 😊

Mantra Meditation (*shamatha or vipassana*)

A mantra is a word or phrase repeated over and over again, either mentally or aloud, during a meditation session.

A mantra with no meaning is selected if it is to serve simply as the focus of one's attention (rather than focusing on the breath). An example would be a meaningless phrase such as, "Va ja poh ta may", this one long enough to be carried through both the in-breath and out-breath.

More typical, however, is a mantra with some meaning, such as for its spiritual, affirmational, or aspirational features. The Loving-Kindness meditation discussed above is but one example. Another, and one of my favorites because of its sentiment, is "*Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu*", a Sanskrit mantra translating roughly as, "*May all beings everywhere be happy and free, and may the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and to that freedom for all.*"

Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are replete with mantras, many [examples](#) of which can be found on YouTube.

One can also use a personal affirmation such as, "I am perfect just as I am", to reinforce a desired attribute or belief.

Himalayan Singing Bowl Meditation (*shamatha*)

This is a favorite soothing meditation of mine, and judging by the number of [singing bowl](#) recordings on YouTube, is favored by many others as well!

Here are the steps I follow:

1. I sit comfortably on my meditation futon and set my timer.
2. I take one of my singing bowls and cup it in the palm of my left hand, making a point to avoid touching the bowl's side (as this would otherwise quickly deaden the bowl's singing). This hand rests on top of my left leg.
3. In my right hand I hold a [felt-covered wood striker](#) . These are available wherever singing bowls are sold and often come with a bowl purchase.
4. I gently but firmly strike the side of the bowl with an upward motion to make it sound.
5. I close my eyes and focus on the sound, listening intently to the various frequencies and pulsating rhythms until they fade completely away. I then continue to listen for a few moments to the silence.
6. I briefly open my eyes and repeat steps 4 and 5 until the timer chimes.

Very soothing and grounding! Do try it for yourself!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 6: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF BEING MINDFUL

If you've read some of the previous chapters you may be asking yourself, "Okay, *concentration, awareness, acceptance, love* - all great concepts - **but what does 'being mindful' actually look like in practice?**"

So, to answer this, I'm going to take you through a hypothetical work day from start to finish, highlighting what would be considered a mindful approach to each part of the day.

The Start of a New Day

- Wake slowly (*slowing down is a feature that permeates mindfulness practice because it helps activate the calming parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) and de-activate its high-alert counterpart, the sympathetic nervous system*).
- Take a few deep, slow breaths (*this too activates the PNS*).
- Do a quick [body-scan meditation](#), no more than a minute or two in duration, this simply being the turning of your attention to each part of your body in sequence to take in any and all sensations - warmth, cool, pressure points, the brush of clothes or bedding against your skin, etc..
- Get out of bed.

Having Breakfast

- Reflect gratefully on having abundant food. Fostering [gratitude](#) has mental, physical, and social benefits.
- Just eat - don't watch TV and eat or check email and eat or mentally run through your day's to-do list and eat- just focus your attention on the act of eating.
- Eat slowly, putting down your fork or spoon between mouthfuls. This helps counter our tendency to rush through life.
- Actively engage your senses, noticing your meal's aroma, texture, appearance, sound, and taste. Doing so keeps you in the present moment and counters a wandering, anxious mind.

Showering, etc.

- Take close notice of the scent of your body wash and shampoo, consciously feel the warm water against your skin, tune into the sound of the cascading water, and note the taste of it. This is simply the practice of fostering present moment awareness.
- While brushing your teeth, focus your full attention on the taste of the toothpaste, its feel in your mouth, the feel of the bristles against your gums, and the sound of the brush as it works its way around your teeth.

General Getting Ready to Head to Work

- While dressing, just focus on dressing. Pay attention to the scent of your clothes, the feel of them against your skin.
- In general, whatever task you are undertaking to get yourself ready to head to work, just focus on that task and nothing else. Don't think about the day ahead, just focus on what you're doing in each moment as you prepare to get yourself ready for the day.
- As an example of a potential upset to your morning, you discover that your husband has, once again (and despite numerous requests!) left his smelly gym socks on your dresser. Instead of getting upset you simply pick them up and put them in the laundry hamper. You reflect on all the loving things he does for you, acknowledge your own infuriating habits, and realize fully that in the big scheme of life, socks left on a dresser just aren't that big a deal. Indeed, you acknowledge that none of life's irritations are that big a deal, and certainly no reason to ruin your day over.
- Meditate 5 minutes (check out Chapter 5: "*Meditation – Why Bother?*") for the basics of how to meditate).
- Create a one-page list of your highest ideals, how you plan to behave in order to live an honorable life of peace and universal fellowship, and give it a quick read at the start of each day.

Driving to Work

- As you are driving, periodically take note of the feel of the steering wheel in your hands, the pressure of the seat against your behind, the feel of your clothes against your skin and the air on your face, the scent of the interior, and the sounds around you. This helps keep you in the present moment and stops your mind from focusing anxiously on the day ahead.
- Notice your surroundings as you drive - the clouds, sunlight, birds. As you do, reflect on the beauty of nature and gratitude for having the great good fortune to experience life.
- Be considerate of other drivers, ceding the right of way.
- Relax and remind yourself that you're not in a hurry, so don't speed, don't tailgate, and don't cut people off.
- If stuck in traffic, see it not as a hindrance but, rather, as an opportunity to deeply investigate your surroundings, to activate your curiosity. Alternatively, use the opportunity to meditate, such as a quick body-scan meditation.
- If other drivers are inconsiderate or reckless don't take it personally, just let it go. Remind yourself that humans are inherently mindless. Further, it has become a cultural norm to live life in a rushed, frantic, self-absorbed manner. And lastly, know that getting upset changes nothing other than needlessly ruining part of your day.

At Work

- Focus on one task at a time. Doing so helps keep anxiety at bay.
- No matter what is asked of you, just do it without adding mental commentary about how stupid, boring, or useless it is. If you can change or delegate such a task, then by all means do so, but if you can't, then just do it. Remember that putting up resistance to reality only makes a situation worse than it already is.
- Turn off email notifications and put your phone on do-not-disturb. Distractions serve only to increase anxiety. Set aside set times to deal with email and phone messages.
- If you need extended alone-time to think, let your colleagues know that you are not to be interrupted. By the same token, be considerate of your colleagues' time and need to focus.
- Know your limitations and set realistic boundaries. Say no to requests you are unable to honour (or simply do not wish to do). And if you must take on a new or unexpected task, make clear the impact on other tasks that won't get to in as timely a manner, *if at all*.
- Set realistic expectations with management, colleagues, and clients.
- Take regular mindfulness breaks (see Chapter 4 – “How to be Mindful” – for ideas). Use these to check in on your mental state. If anxious or upset, simply acknowledge this, close your eyes, take a few slow, deep breaths, consciously relax all your muscles, and *smile* (even if it's a fake smile). Know that nothing is so important as to let it ruin your day.

- Know that whatever you face, no matter how frustrating, it's all simply part of life, nothing new that untold others have not also experienced. Whatever comes your way, simply deal with it in a calm, matter-of-fact manner.
- Take fifteen-minute morning and afternoon breaks to get a snack, stretch, go for a walk, meditate and, in general, relax and lighten up.
- If you're able to get out for a walk and encounter litter, pick it up and dispose of it. *Be the world you want, for everyone's sake.*
- Eat lunch as you ate breakfast, engaging all your senses and just focusing on the act of eating. This is best done in a secluded, quiet spot to give your mind a break and help it slow down. A noisy lunch room is not conducive to this.
- Start each meeting with a minute of silence. Creativity needs a stilled mind.
- Before sending an email or leaving a voice message take a deep, relaxing breath to avoid unhelpful negative tone.
- Before taking an incoming phone call, take a deep, relaxing breath (to activate your calming parasympathetic nervous system) and then smile! The subsequent conversation will go all the better for having done so.
- Keep mindfulness reminders around your desk (I kept a Buddha figurine on my desk).
- At day's end, *stop working*, turn off your email and work phone, and go home. Your life outside work is equally, if not more, important. Know with deep humility that the world will not come to an untimely end if you don't get all your tasks done each day. You're just not that important in the big scheme of things - *none of us are.*

Driving Home

- Repeat your morning process.
- At a stop light, if solicited for cash by one of the many street people, lower your window, greet them warmly, and give them more than your brain is advising - your heart will thank you afterward.
- Ideally, get to the gym for some exercise before heading home or work out at home. Regular exercise benefits not only your physical fitness but also your mental health.

Eating Supper

- Repeat your breakfast process.

Day's End Before Bedtime

- If you have errands to run after work, *don't rush* - just focus on the tasks at hand and forego any negative mental commentary. Know fully that even errands are part of life.

"Changing the filter, wiping noses, going to meetings, picking up around the house, washing dishes, checking the dipstick - don't let yourself think that these are distracting you from your more serious pursuits. Such a round of chores is not a set of difficulties we hope to escape - it is our path."

Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Wherever You Go, There You Are"

- Spend quality time with family and friends, listening mindfully to their stories (i.e. giving them your full attention, your personal electronics turned off or ignored).
- Consider maintaining a gratitude journal, each evening documenting those things you experienced that day for which you are grateful.
- Meditate for at least fifteen minutes.
- Turn off all screen electronics at least one hour before bedtime.
- Read a few pages about mindfulness, even if it's from the same book of wisdom over and over again every night. Contemplate the message.

Bed Time

- Get to bed early enough to ensure eight hours of sleep.

The essence of living mindfully

As illustrated above, living mindfully is characterized as follows:

- You pay attention to life, right here, right now, in the present moment rather than residing in the past or the future.
- You live as an equanimous, curious observer of the inputs from your five senses, eschewing mental commentary and judgments.
- You accept life as it actually is rather than troubling your mind with how you wish it were.
- You embody patience, compassion, gratitude, integrity, and kindness. In doing so you influence our world for the better.
- You realize that there's no place to rush to and no better place to be than being present - right here, right now. Better is just a state of mind.
- You commit to ongoing mindfulness practice and study.
- You are grateful for life itself and all the wonderful things it presents.
- There is a lightness to your life, a gentleness, an ease of being.
- You seek out moments of stillness for quiet contemplation.

Living mindfully means living consciously, aware of and alert to life's small joys. In this manner you limit the remit of your stress system and find yourself supported and nurtured by a calm knowing that life is rather fine, just the way it is.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 7: HOW TO SEE

What, is this a joke?! What sort of silly topic is this, "How to See"?!?

You want to see something? No problem - just open your eyes and, voila: seeing!

Well, no actually, that's not seeing - that's just *looking*.

"Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it."

Confucius, Chinese philosopher, 551-479 BC

Looking, Seeing - What's the Difference?

Looking is merely a mechanical process:

1. Light is reflected off an object.
2. That reflected light enters your eye.
3. The lens in your eye focuses the light on to your retina.
4. Your retina converts the light to an electrochemical signal.
5. Neurons carry that signal to your brain.
6. Your brain translates the signal into a 3D image; a depiction of what's "out there".

However, there are two additional steps missing from this chain of events to turn looking into seeing:

1. Conscious awareness.
2. Focus of attention.

Conscious Awareness

The first thing that makes looking different from seeing is *conscious awareness* of the brain's depiction of what's "out there".

For example, let's say you're hiking along a quiet wooded trail with your young daughter. She's enraptured by the many butterflies, chipmunks, squirrels, woodpeckers, blue jays, and other assorted critters along the route.

In stark contrast, you notice none of these wonders, your attention instead fixated on a difficult issue you face at work. Even though you're *looking* at the same scene as your daughter you *see* virtually none of it. With your mind elsewhere, it simply doesn't register in your conscious awareness.

In this manner, whenever we lack presence we don't actually see or appreciate our immediate surroundings. The many small joys of life completely pass us by.

Focus of Attention

To simplify communication, we developed the useful practice of assigning names to things - car, building, cake, uncle Joe. This makes conversation so much easier because we don't have to describe each object we're talking about: "the metal thing with four rubber wheels that moves when the pedal inside the occupant-chamber is depressed".

So far, so useful.

But problems begin when, after repeated encounters with the same object, ***we limit our experience of that object to just its superficial name.***

An example will help clarify what I'm getting at here.

So, we arrive at work and see the same office building we've toiled away in for the past eight years. If it registers in our consciousness at all it's merely as "the office building where I work". We *look* at it but do not *see* it.

But let's put ourselves in the shoes of a new-hire encountering that same building for the very first time. What do they take note of? Just "the office building where I now work"?

Probably not. Because the building is a novelty to them, they likely take *conscious notice* of the building's overall shape, the colour of its walls, the pattern of its windows, the scent of the flowers bordering its entrance, and dozens of other features about their new environment. They actually *see* it!

What's going on here is the exact same thing that makes travel to a new locale *seem* so much more interesting than life back home.

The objects and places you encounter every day have become so familiar to you that they no longer warrant close examination – you have become blind to their opportunities for joy and deeper insight.

In short, if all we ever do is *look*, then familiarity can indeed breed contempt.

True seeing, then, takes mindfulness: consciously engaging our senses to actually *notice* our surroundings.

But What is There to Notice - It's Just a Boring Building!

Yes, if you limit your experience of an object to just its superficial label ("the office building where I work"), viewing it all in one go, you may indeed find it boring and not worthy of your conscious attention or consideration.

But there is another way to view the world, a better way in my opinion, that brings the seemingly routine parts of our world to life again. I refer to this way of seeing as "***going into photography mode***".

Going Into Photography Mode

When I first took an interest in photography, I mistakenly thought that good camera gear was the key to good photos. But I was completely wrong. In actual fact the equipment deployed has virtually nothing to do with it.

So, what does? **The ability to SEE!**

"Photography is an art of observation. It's about finding something interesting in an ordinary place. It has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with how you see them."

Elliott Erwitt, photographer

How to See

"Going into photography mode" means to *change the way you view the world around you*.

Instead of seeing your surroundings in terms of objects, each with a familiar name, in photography mode we view them in terms of their components and overall feel:

- *lines*
- *curves*
- *shapes*
- *intersections*
- *colours*
- *textures*
- *patterns*
- *symmetry*
- *shades of light and dark*
- *reflections*
- *contrasts*
- *emotional impact*

Seeing the world in these terms necessitates *mindful noticing* - looking beyond the familiar objects before you and, instead, looking at them with renewed curiosity in terms of these components. In many cases you are looking *inside* the everyday to see past their familiar exterior.

That "Boring" Office Building

So, back to that seemingly-boring office building. Instead of seeing "just a building", someone in photography mode may take note of:

- **Reflections in the windows.**
- **Shadows slanting across the building's exterior.**
- **The texture of the brick.**
- **The exterior's warm glow in the late-day sun.**
- **The apparent convergence of the exterior walls when viewed from below.**
- **A lone light in an otherwise dark building.**

Here's an example of what I'm talking about, this a photo I took of a farm house near my home. On the face of it this scene could be considered rather non-descript; until looked at in photography mode - in other words, when looked at mindfully!



Here are some of the components that compelled me to take this photo:

- Notice the many triangles: 1) The road. 2) The bottom right corner of the road bordered by its median line. 3) The front yard. 4) The triangle formed by an imaginary line drawn across the tops of the trees + along their base + the right edge of the photo. 5) The roof peak. 6) The mass of cloud on the right of the picture, again drawing an imaginary line across its top edge. 7) The snow banks.
- The symmetry created by the parallel lines formed by the trees, home, telephone pole, and silo.
- To my eye, the trees at the entrance to the driveway lend a menacing presence, their branches seemingly reaching out to grab incautious passersby.
- The contrast of the black and white components.
- The contrasting textures of the smooth road and sky vs. the front fence and yard.
- To my eye there's an eeriness about this scene, I believe due in part to its inhospitable starkness and absence of life.

Looked at mindfully, a scene unnoticed and unremarked by many becomes one of compelling interest.

“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself”

Henry Miller, American writer (b 1891)

For other examples, do check out the photos on [my Flickr site](#). As you assess them, take particular note of how the components listed above work together to render them interesting (well, hopefully interesting)! :-)

Noticing is Mindfulness!

Living each day in "photography mode" is a wonderful way of making your way through life because, in doing so, you cannot help but be mindful. Noticing *is* mindfulness!

Why? Because the act of noticing keeps us in the present moment, the only moment where life actually happens. And when we live in the present moment - when mind and body are in the same place at the same time - *that's when we're happiest.*

Think of it this way - if your mind is always focused on noticing the world around you, *really seeing it and engaging with it*, you can't also be fussing over the past, fretting about the future, or wasting your life in spaced-out fantasy.

I truly hope that you *see* what I mean! (awful pun sadly intended 😊)

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 8: MINDFUL GRIEVING

**"One foot in front of the other, over and over again
Until a new-normal dawns
And a future you'd not expected
gradually reveals itself."**

Anonymous

Mindful Grieving

I write these opening words while listening to our Lucy's labored breathing and episodic coughing (she the non-tail-biting one pictured above, the other being our little Molly), this caused by fluid build-up around her 14-year-old heart.

This morning I had to carry her out to her regular pooping spot on the vacant lot across the street as she just couldn't summon the strength to get there on her own. How quickly she has deteriorated!

Where she used to feel solid in my arms, muscles well-formed and taut from regular exercise, today they felt like a soft sponge, giving way to my supporting arms with no resistance whatsoever.

For the moment she appears to be comfortable enough as she lies on her bed beside me, but stares aimlessly ahead. Every now and then she glances up at me with those old deep-brown eyes of hers, eyes that seem to hold the question - what's happening to me dad?

What's happening is that Lucy, our sometimes-infuriating, ever the intellectually-challenged, but oh-so-lovable West Highland terrier is dying - and I miss her already.

Applied Mindfulness

How do we deal with such pain? How do we deal with the loss of those who have brought so much joy into our lives?

Fortunately, mindfulness has some answers:

- Meditation for calming a troubled mind.
- Meditation for reflecting on the nature of impermanence.
- Meditation for overcoming isolation.
- Gratitude practice to maintain perspective.
- Mindfulness teachings on the nature of thought.

Shamatha Meditation - Calming the Mind

As discussed in Chapter 5, there are two main types of meditation - *shamatha* for building concentration (typically through sustained focus on the breath) and *vipassana* for gaining clearer insight into the human condition.

Mindfulness teaches that a wandering mind is an anxious mind. Shamatha meditation helps us overcome this by strengthening our ability to focus attention on the present moment.

This is particularly relevant to the process of grieving when our mind tends to dwell on the past and fret about an unknowable, uncertain future.

Vipassana Meditation - Reflecting on Impermanence

The Buddha taught that all living things experience pain, that pain is simply a part of life and so cannot be escaped.

Impermanence is one form of pain, this being the truism that everything in the universe - absolutely everything - is in constant flux and that nothing lasts forever.

We know this intellectually of course, yet still rail against the unfairness and cruelty of its implications - that loved ones die.

Vipassana meditation provides an avenue to reflect on the truth of impermanence and, thereby, come to terms with its implications.

In short, looking the inevitability of death straight in the eye rather than averting our gaze provides a measure of calm acceptance and comforting solace.

Tonglen Meditation - Overcoming Isolation

[Tonglen practice](#) turns on its head our habit of turning inward at times of grief, times when we tend to dwell almost exclusively on our own personal loss and sorrow.

Instead, Tonglen teaches us to reflect on the fact that millions of others, right now, just like us, are also suffering the loss of a loved one - a spouse, a child, a friend, a parent, a beloved pet ...

And, upon such reflection, Tonglen advises us to breathe in this collective pain, shouldering it fully in our mind's eye, and then to breathe out to this community connected by mutual grief all the compassion and desire for relief from suffering that we can muster.

Is Tonglen practice actually going to provide relief to the multitude? Probably not. But it does elicit an expansion of our otherwise circumscribed, isolated, and lonely perspective on life after a loss.

By reminding us of our shared humanity, by teaching us to open up to loss rather than shut down, Tonglen practice helps soften the edges of our hurt.

Gratitude

Grief can cause us to lose perspective, scattering our attention over all manner of concerns. Soon life seems a struggle with overwhelming challenges seemingly everywhere.

[Gratitude practice](#), reflecting on all we still have to be thankful for, serves as a useful counterweight to such unhelpful thinking.

Grieving Positively – Remembering the Nature of Thought

We know we're grieving positively when positive feelings arise whenever we bring our loved ones to mind, feelings such as gratitude for having had the privilege of knowing them intimately, or joy in remembering the wonderful times spent together.

On the other hand, we know we're grieving negatively when negative feelings arise – wishing pointlessly that they were still around or fearing a future without their support, counsel, and companionship.

Now I fully appreciate that for many this guidance will sound totally wrongheaded, cold even. In our society it's the norm to dwell in deep sadness for a considerable length of time after a loved one's death. *But the existence of a norm doesn't mean it's beneficial or the best option available.*

In fact, the existence of our current normal for intense, prolonged sadness should be no more surprising than observing that it's normal for a beginning tennis player to hit the ball into the net most of the time.

What's lacking in both instances? *Practice.*

In the absence of mind training (via regular exposure to mindfulness teachings and daily meditation) there's a near-zero chance of rising above our evolutionary programming, and that programming clearly dictates prolonged, intense sadness.

But why? One theory is that at the dawn of our arrival as a species tens of thousands of years ago, such intense sadness was a potentially life-saving signal to the tribe that you need help. But why should this still apply to us today?

In the final analysis, we need to remember that emotions are driven by our thoughts and that thoughts arise *inside us*; they're not forced upon us by outside circumstances.

As a result, we always get to *choose* whether to remember our loved ones with a peaceful, joyful mind or an anxious, depressed mind.

But this assumes regular mindfulness practice in order to even have this choice. In the absence of such practice, it is difficult to see how one could expect anything other than our usual evolutionary default - prolonged emotional distress.

It's Okay to be Happy While Grieving

Perhaps it's a cultural thing; after all, the Irish do seem to handle death better than most with their celebratory [wakes](#).

But for the rest of us, does there not seem to be some measure of guilt, an inappropriateness even, to expressing joy while simultaneously grieving the loss of a loved one?

But what exactly is the point of putting on a sad face just to play a cultural role? Absolutely nothing to my way of thinking.

Being open to moments of happiness and joy in the midst of grieving helps soften the blow of loss, keeping us in the present moment and reminding us that the good, the bad, and the indifferent are all just part of life.

And in the final analysis, life after loss keeps rolling on, just along a different path.

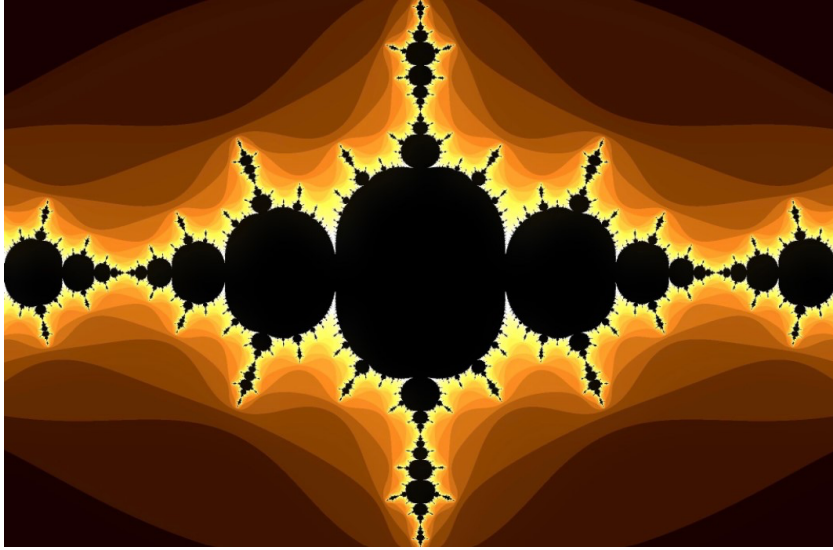
Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Epilogue - Goodbye to Our Lucy

After a long, unsettled night overhearing poor Lucy's labored breathing, Lynda and I made the difficult but compassionate decision to relieve her of her distress and discomfort.

While rubbing her furry little ears one last time, our Lucy was put to rest at 10:40am on the morning of Saturday, September 21st, 2019.



Chapter 9: COVID-19 ANXIETY RELIEF TOOL-KIT

With breathtaking speed our world has been turned upside-down by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are bombarded by an unremitting stream of bad news. Uncertainty, fear, anxiety, sadness, and stress abound.

But we can't let this get the best of us because, if left unchecked, fear undergoes its own contagion, spreading faster than the virus itself. Collective stress ramps up and awful implications follow:

- Stress [weakens our immune system](#). Enough said.
- Sustained stress can lead to [compassion fatigue](#), just when we need to care for each other the most.
- Stress [impairs access to the wise part of our brain](#), our frontal cortex. This is the locus of our executive functioning: emotional control, impulse control, and creativity. To think clearly, and to be at our best, we need to remain calm.

Mindfulness Toolkit for Calm

Here's how we're going to get through this together: each of us is going to take personal responsibility for our own psychological health. Our combined calming presence will in turn have a calming effect on those around us. Together, we can initiate a ripple of calm throughout society.

"I like to use the example of a small boat crossing the Gulf of Siam. In Vietnam there are many people, called boat people, who leave the country in small boats. Often the boats are caught in rough seas or storms, the people may panic, and boats may sink.

But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. His or her expression – face, voice – communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says.

One such person can save the lives of many. You are that person."

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk

The practice of mindfulness is more than up to this challenge. Numerous studies attest to its efficacy to reduce stress and anxiety (as well as providing numerous other health benefits).

Below I provide a compendium of pertinent mindfulness practices and miscellaneous insights designed to help nurture sound mental health. My guidance is to make use of these whenever you feel yourself becoming anxious or stressed:

Deep Breathing

Slow, conscious, deep breathing activates our calming parasympathetic nervous system, thus helping to shut down our stress reaction.

- Sit comfortably, gently close your eyes, breathe in slowly to the count of four, hold for seven, breathe out to the count of eight. Repeat at least three times. You may also wish to silently repeat the words "calm" on the in-breath and "peace" on the out-breath.

Smile

Smiling, even if forced, has a calming effect and helps to counter the over-seriousness we feel when stressed. It is known to promote the release of such helpful hormones as serotonin (calming), dopamine (positive feelings), and endorphins (natural pain killers).

- In my practice I sit comfortably, close my eyes, relax my body, and then bring to mind the semi-historic Chinese monk, Budai (pictured on Page 72), colloquially known as the "laughing buddha". He never fails to bring a smile to my face. You can, of course, use your own cue for smiling, like a dear friend or a family pet.

Body Softening Scan

Because mind and body are interconnected, consciously relaxing your muscles automatically relaxes your mind, choking off the stress response.

- Sit comfortably, close your eyes, breathe naturally, and begin to turn your focus of attention to each part of your body in turn. I usually start from the toes of my right foot moving on to my sole, upper foot, ankle, etc., over to the toes of my other foot and on upward to the top of my head.
- As you focus on each body part in turn, consciously soften the muscles there, perhaps bringing the image of melting wax to mind.
- As a tool to aid focus, try imagining that you are physically breathing into and out of each body part that you bring into focus.

Nature Walk

If physically able, take a slow-paced stroll through a forest or other natural area and really pay attention to the sights, sounds, scents, and feel.

- Focusing intently on our senses brings us into the present moment. Doing so has been found to make us feel happier and more at peace. Confining our attention to the present moment calms an otherwise anxious mind that is all too often fretting over an unchangeable past or fearing an unknowable future.

Gratitude

For evolutionary reasons designed to keep us alert to potential danger, it is built into us to focus more on the few bad things in our life rather than the many-times-more-abundant good things. Needless to say, such an orientation drags us down and amplifies our stress.

- Take a moment to bring to mind all the many things for which you are grateful, that bring you joy, and for which you are deeply appreciative. These can be as simple as the sound of birds outside your kitchen window or as profoundly comforting as a deeply-rewarding friendship.

Miscellaneous Mindful Moments

Make a point of inserting some of the practices outlined below into your daily routine or whenever you feel stress and anxiety coming on. They help activate your calming system, shut down your stress reaction, and bring you into the present moment, thus eliminating thoughts of the past and future that tend to create mental upset.

If you wish to regiment these throughout your day, consider downloading a timing app such as the one I use, "Mindful Me", that provides regular reminders to take a mental break:

1. **Pause, Breathe, Smile (PBS)** - stop what you're doing, close your eyes if feasible, take a few deep conscious breaths, and smile. As with the deep breathing technique mentioned above, you may wish to mentally repeat the words "calm" on the in-breath and "peace" on the out-breath.
2. **Seeing Red** - for a set period of time, say the next hour, make a point of spotting things around you that are red (or any colour of choice). Doing so forces you into the present moment.
3. **5-senses break** - stop what you're doing and tune into your five senses in sequence, noting each with heightened curiosity. Doing so creates presence.
4. **Practice S.T.O.P.** - 1) Stop whatever you're doing. 2) Take a few slow, deep breaths. 3) Observe your thoughts, feelings, and emotions but without identifying with them. Simply observe them in the same manner you observe inputs from your other senses. 4) Proceed with a kindness to yourself - a gentle stroll, healthy snack, or casual conversation with a friend.
5. **Find your feet** - stop what you're doing and focus full attention on the sensations in your feet. This practice shuts down anxious thinking and brings you back into the present moment. Why the feet? Because stress makes itself felt in places like our belly, chest, shoulders, and face but *not* our feet, so focusing there moves us away from stress.
6. **What will my next thought be?** - this practice is from spiritual teacher, Eckhart Tolle. Close your eyes and focus intently on what your next thought will be. Be like a cat crouched and alert just outside a mouse hole. If my experience is any guide, you may have to wait a fair while!
7. **Random noticing** - close your eyes, turn your head in a random direction, re-open your eyes, and then intensely study whatever comes into view. Be like a scientist encountering a strange new phenomenon. Note absolutely everything about the scene, engaging all your senses to take in colours, textures, feel, scents, sounds, shapes, light, dark, shadows
8. **Mindful accessory** - wear a colourful band on your finger or wrist and each time you notice it, practice PBS - pause, breathe, and smile!
9. **Recovery Period** - after finishing a task, don't immediately plunge into the next. Instead, take a mini break and do something kind for yourself.
10. **Task focus** - whatever you're doing, just focus intently on the process of doing it, not on the end result. Doing so keeps you in the present moment.

Limit News Intake

Like the guidance I used to provide my clients urging them not to pay attention to the stock market, it is equally prudent to limit your intake of troubling news.

Immersing yourself unduly in the COVID-19 tragedy serves only to make the challenge of stress management all the more difficult - akin to purposely exposing yourself to a virus over and over and over again.

Managing Troubling Thoughts

Anxious thoughts often get stuck in our minds, lowering our mood and triggering our stress response. Here are a couple ideas that may help:

- In your mind's eye, picture your thoughts inside a soap bubble that is floating in the air around eye level. Watch it rise slowly upward and upward and then 'pop' - gone. Then turn your mind and focus on to something else.
- In your mind, speak directly to your thought - "*Hello fear, hello anxiety - I see you*". Bringing troubling thoughts into conscious awareness often has the effect of diminishing their stress-inducing impact.

Meditations on Compassion

When we're troubled, it often helps to reverse roles. Rather than be the sufferer, you turn yourself into the healer, extending good wishes out to all those suffering, just like you.

1. **Tonglen meditation** - On each in-breath, imagine you are breathing in the pain of others - all of it. On the out-breath, imagine you are sending them (and yourself) relief from suffering and ease of being. Imagine a feeling of lightness, brightness, and cool accompanying each out-breath. Breathe in suffering, breathe out relief and good wishes.
2. **Loving-Kindness meditation** - in a variation on this type of meditation, we voice the following phrases in our mind several times, sending out good wishes to all those who may be suffering:
 - *May all be happy and content*
 - *May all be healthy in mind, body, and spirit*
 - *May all be safe from mental and physical harm*
 - *May all have ease of being*

Selected Teachings of the Buddha

The Buddha taught his followers to face reality head-on and not to look away in fear. He also encouraged them to confirm the truth of his teachings for themselves and not to take his or anyone else's word for it. Some 2600 years later, his guidance remains pertinent, especially in these difficult times:

- **Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.** We experience suffering when we make a fuss over life's inevitable troubles. Resistance is futile in the face of something that already is. The alternative? Calm acceptance: whatever troubles come your way, just see them as part of life and deal with them matter-of-factly.
- **Impermanence** - everything in the entire universe is in constant flux, nothing is unchanging. Good times come to an end, *but so do bad times*.
- **Realistic Options** - when faced with troubles we have three sane options: 1) Change the situation if possible. 2) Remove ourselves from the situation if possible. 3) If neither change nor removal is possible, the only sane response remaining is *acceptance* - to face reality with equanimity and deal with it with wisdom rather than unintelligent and futile resistance.
- **Our thoughts make our world** - *"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world."* - Buddha. In other words, change the channel on your thoughts if you wish to change the program from tragedy to comedy - it's always your choice.

Maintaining Perspective

In the midst of a crisis, it is all too easy to lose perspective and become overwhelmed by the unremitting bad news. Seeking out alternative story lines can help balance the scale, raise your mood, and give cause for hope.

In this regard, here are some positive thoughts to ponder related to COVID-19:

- A [recent article](#) in the Economist magazine reports that there are seven existing drugs thought to hold promise in treating the symptoms of COVID-19. One, Actemra, is already being put to use in China.
- Clinical trials on potential COVID-19 vaccines are reported to already be underway in China and the United States.
- The world's best and brightest are toiling away 24/7 to bring this virus under control.
- The virus cannot survive simple soap and water, giving us all some degree of control over infection through rigorous personal hygiene.

- Ultimately, if despite social distancing, not touching your face, and frequent hand washing you are still unlucky enough to contract the virus, then you can take a measure of solace from the fact that, according to the World Health Organization, roughly 8 out of 10 people will experience only [mild symptoms](#). Of course, the elderly and those with certain existing health conditions need to take extra precautions, but for the majority of people this virus does not pose an existential health threat.
- On the economic front, governments around the world are turning on the money taps and implementing corporate and personal financial support programs to soften the blow to the global economy.
- On the human front, heartwarming stories of compassion are increasingly on display. People are reaching out to their elderly neighbors with offers to buy essentials for them. Those in self-imposed quarantine are being tended to by friends and family. Stay-at-home moms and dads are helping their working neighbors with offers of free childcare. We are pulling together to get through this.

I firmly believe there will be a silver lining to this tragedy and can envision the following:

- Pandemic preparedness and global cooperation will be better going forward.
- Commercial supply chains will be designed with greater flexibility and resilience in mind.
- World leaders who manage this crisis poorly will be turfed in favor of more competent individuals.
- Stronger social programs will be put in place (such as paid sick leave and universal health care in the United States).
- This crisis will bring people together and help them appreciate our shared destiny, interdependence, and interconnection.

Tend to Your Well Being

As U.S. President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, said in his stirring [inaugural address](#) delivered at the peak of the Great Depression in 1933, "*the only thing we have to fear is fear itself*". I agree with him wholeheartedly.

But to be of help to others during these difficult times we first need to look after ourselves, mentally and physically. I hope this guide goes some way to providing you with the tools for tending to your own mental well-being.

Keep safe everyone, look after yourselves, and spread your calm presence widely.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 10: NURTURING OPTIMAL MENTAL HEALTH

Mindfulness practice has the power to transform our lives, helping us to:

1. Deal with life's challenges with greater wisdom.
2. Be kinder, gentler, more compassionate human beings.
3. Maintain a healthier perspective on life.
4. Nurture a life of peace, happiness, and contentment irrespective of external circumstances.

The question is, how do we bring these about?

Mind Training

Fortunately, there are simple meditation practices specifically designed to train the mind in a manner that naturally fosters optimal mental health.

Intended as a short daily practice, they consist of these components:

1. Calming the mind.
2. Quiet reflection on key mindfulness teachings.
3. Affirmation and visualization of the traits we wish to nurture.

In my own case, I devote between fifteen to twenty minutes each morning to a particular mindfulness routine that incorporates all three of these techniques.

What I especially like about this practice is that, despite its simplicity and brevity, it is impressively comprehensive, providing daily exposure to many of the core teachings of mindfulness.

Indeed, *it is exactly this repetitive exposure that lies at the heart of its magic*. Through the science of [neuroplasticity](#), consistent practice beneficially alters the neuronal structure of your brain. Over time, the wisdom of mindfulness steadily becomes integrated fully into who you are.

In short, for anyone wishing to foster a more peaceful life and to nurture optimal mental health, I can think of no better mindfulness practice to help bring these about.

An Important Caveat

One important word of guidance however. As with the learning of any new skill, ***persistence and patience are essential***. Count on dedicated practice for at least a couple months to even begin to notice a difference.

So, please don't give up just because you feel you're not making progress. You are.

But it won't happen overnight. The changes will prove subtle, virtually unnoticeable from day to day.

Until, that is, you suddenly catch yourself feeling happy for no reason, or responding to an unpleasant situation with a wisdom you hadn't realized you possessed, or finding joy in little things that previously would have escaped your notice.

In other words, when the reality of a better you, a mentally-healthier you, suddenly becomes too obvious to overlook.

And it *will* happen - but only through persistent daily practice.

"Lasting well-being arises from cultivating positive emotions and wisdom."

"It requires sustained effort in training the mind and developing a set of human qualities such as inner peace, mindfulness, and altruistic love."

"Such effort is eminently desirable. We need to get rid of mental toxins and at the same time to cultivate states of mind that contribute to emotional balance and ensure the optimal flourishing of a truly healthy mind."

Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and author of "[Happiness - A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill](#)"

The Practice: 'CAGPACSS'

The mnemonic 'CAGPACSS' helps us to remember the practice's eight components:

- **Calm concentration**
- **Awareness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Patience**
- **Acceptance**
- **Compassion**
- **Slow**
- **Smile**

The practice itself is completely straightforward: *simply contemplate each component in turn, bringing to mind the core teachings relating to each one.*

Of course, this obviously necessitates *some* familiarity with these teachings!

Not to worry! To assist you in this regard, I present below some of the most pertinent teachings (along with numerous links to access expanded discussions).

For beginners reading this post I do appreciate that the CAGPACSS practice may seem a touch overwhelming. However, please don't be put off from giving it a try - much potential happiness and personal growth hangs in the balance.

In addition, if my personal experience is any guide, as familiarity with the teachings grows, what you actually mentally ponder shrinks materially. Indeed, in some instances I've found that mentally contemplating just one word proves sufficient to acknowledge the truth of an entire body of wisdom.

So, now somewhat undaunted, let's begin! 😊

Calm Concentration

This is simply a quick [body scan meditation](#) to settle the mind and bring us into the present moment. I typically devote about three to four minutes to this opening practice.

Here are the basic opening steps: 1) Assume any standard meditation posture. 2) Take three deep, slow breaths (in to the count of four, hold for seven, out for eight, pause for four, repeat). 3) Mentally smile. 4) Start to breathe normally.

Next, turn your attention to the toes of your right foot, noting any and all sensations. Then move on to your right ankle, right shin, etc. until you have worked your way around your entire body.

As each is brought into awareness, consciously soften and relax those muscles. If it helps, pretend you are actually breathing through each body part.

The purpose here is to still the mind, relax the body, strengthen your ability to focus, and render you more receptive to the subsequent steps.

Awareness

Along with *Concentration*, *Acceptance*, and *Love*, Awareness forms one of the four key components of mindfulness. Once internalized, these provide a solid foundation for abiding peace.

The practice here is simply to briefly reflect on each of these teachings:

1. *Suffering*. Pain is an inescapable part of life (loved ones die, relationships end, health and vigor deteriorate, etc.). Suffering, however, is optional and arises when we resist this fact. We suffer when we cling obsessively to the things we like or try to push away the things we don't like. When we experience pain, it doesn't mean anything's wrong, it just means we're alive. Don't resist pain and find psychological freedom.
2. *Impermanence*. Everything comes to an end. Resist this truth and needless suffering follows. Accept this truth and peace of mind reigns.
3. *Intentions*. Here, silently bring to mind those character traits you aspire to embody. Visualize yourself acting in such a manner. I use the phrasing, "May I be" (e.g. May I be kind). Some of the ideals I personally aspire to include the following: being generous, ethical, patient, respectful, kind, gentle, considerate, compassionate, understanding, mindful, caring, thoughtful, and selfless.
4. *Interdependence and Interconnection*. Our egos tell us we are separate and apart. [Reality tells us differently](#). In truth, [we are all related](#), [we all came from stardust](#), we all want the same things (to be happy and safe), and we're all dependent on one another.
5. *Perspective*. Mentally fussing over moments we find disagreeable is confirmation of a loss of perspective and a lack of humility. The hard truth is that we are but insignificant flotsam in a vast unfolding universe. Only our comically-outsized egos lead us to believe otherwise.
6. *Human behaviour*. Our evolutionary inheritance inclines us to be self-centered, selfish, judgmental, nepotistic, and discontent. Expect differently from others and you will suffer. Understand and accept the biological basis behind our nature and be free.
7. *Thoughts, feelings, emotions*. 1) Most thoughts pop into our head without conscious involvement. Someone does something we don't like and, without any volition on our part, our protective stress system kicks in and angry thoughts arise. But we are not our thoughts - *we don't have to take them seriously*. We can distance ourselves from our thoughts, just be [observers of our thoughts](#), and then *choose* how to respond (or, indeed, even *whether* to respond). 2) Feelings and emotions are simply evolution's way of nudging us to maximize gene propagation, not to maximize our happiness.

Being aware of this, we realize we don't have to take feelings and emotions seriously. Just as with thoughts, we get to choose what to do about them, if anything. If not latched on to, they soon dissipate. 3) Negative feelings are the result of negative thoughts. Change the thoughts and our feelings change for the better - it's that simple, and it's always our choice. 4) External factors don't cause us to feel a certain way. It's our thinking about those factors that do. Change our thinking and our perspective changes, for the better.

8. *Bodily sensations.* Tightness in our body is a signal that our stress system is switching on and our wisdom is switching off. We use awareness of such tightness to pause, take slow, deep breaths, calm ourselves, smile, regain perspective, and then, and only then, proceed in a wise manner. In so doing, our next action becomes our *choice* rather than our unthinking reaction.
9. *Present moment.* Being mindful means to be fully aware of each present moment, to make it a point to take notice, to pay attention. Residing always in the 'now', not the past or future, is one of the keys to achieving enduring happiness and a peaceful life.

In addition, being mindful of the present moment means living in "bare awareness"; living in lightness of being through conscious contact with our five senses *minus any judgmental commentary*. In other words, we acknowledge that sound is just sound, scent is just scent, sight is just sight, touch is just touch, and taste is just taste. They only cause upset when we add negative commentary.

"This very simple process of noticing puts you in the present and makes you sensitive to context and perspective. It's the essence of engagement. Noticing turns out to be literally and figuratively enlivening."

Dr. Ellen Langer, Professor of psychology, Harvard University and author of "[Mindfulness](#)"

Gratitude

Here the practice is simply to reflect on some of the things you are grateful for.

Why this is important is that evolution has inclined us to be a "glass-half-empty" bunch, wasting much psychic energy fussing over the few bad things in our lives when, in reality, these are but insignificant trifles relative to all we have to be grateful for.

Should you have difficulty bringing some to mind try these helpful prompts:

- what never fails to bring a smile to your face?
- what makes your life easier?
- what brings you joy?
- what gifts do you bring to the world?

We need not search for the profound here. Indeed, it's often the simplest of things that prove to be some of our greatest sources of gratitude. By way of example, some of mine include such seemingly unremarkable things as passing clouds, the scent of a forest, the activity of birds around our feeders, and the sound of leaves in a breeze. All make my life better and would be deeply missed if absent.

Patience

Here I bring to mind this important reminder:

"Let the world unfold in its own time. Don't struggle against it as this leads only to sorrow."

I also reflect on the types of people with whom I often feel impatient. For me these include the incurious, the illogical, the irrational, the unthinking, the dogmatic, the impatient, and the aggressive.

The point of reflecting on such people is to heighten our sensitivity to them so that, in their presence, we may remain doubly patient and compassionate.

Acceptance

Here I bring to mind these simple words of wisdom:

"Whatever life presents, just deal with it. Forego any drama as this leads only to suffering."

"There are no 'problems', simply situations to be dealt with."

The essence of this teaching is that, whatever life brings our way, it's all just part of life - the good *and* the bad - so just accept it all and deal with it, calmly and in a matter-of-fact manner.

"To offer no resistance to life is to be in a state of grace, ease, and lightness. This state is then no longer dependent upon things being in a certain way, good or bad."

Eckhart Tolle, author of ["The Power of Now"](#)

It is acceptance that lies behind such pithy sayings as, "Let it go" and "Let it be". Simple, yet they carry much wise counsel.

Compassion

The teaching here is to extend [compassion](#) to *everyone*, without exception, under all circumstances, in every situation, full stop.

Why? *Because an individual's behaviour at any given moment is the best they can muster.* To believe otherwise, to believe they 'ought to have known better', is to ignore basic human biology.

What creates a behaviour? A particular set of neurons fire to create an action (*we don't control these*). Those neurons were kicked into action by particular hormones (*we don't control these*). Those hormones were released in response to particular stimuli (*we don't control these*). Those stimuli were

And so on, and so on all the way back to evolutionary impacts on human behaviour from millennia ago (*and we don't control these either*).

What this describes is an *inevitable* chain of events that, once set into motion, cannot be altered. *And we have no direct control over any of the stages of this cascade of prior causes.*

In fact, it is only with the benefit of hindsight that better behaviour *appears* to have been a choice. But in real time, it was simply an impossibility.

Of course, daily practices such as CAGPACSS can *improve the odds of better behaviour* by altering our brain structure. Indeed, we commit to such practices specifically to become better citizens of the world, ones who contribute to its peace rather than add to its aggression. In so doing, we also contribute to our own optimal mental health.

The moral of the story then is this:

At any given moment, we're all just doing the best we can.

As a result, it necessarily follows that *extending compassion to everyone, regardless of circumstance, is always the wisest response.*

"When we consider an individual in the clutches of hatred, anger, and aggression, we should consider him more as a sick patient than as an enemy; someone who should be healed, not punished."

Matthieu Ricard

To help nurture compassion I mentally repeat these words (taken from a ['Loving Kindness' meditation](#)), placing inclusive emphasis on the word "all":

May all be happy and content

May all be healthy in mind, body, and spirit

May all be safe from mental and physical harm

May all have ease of being.

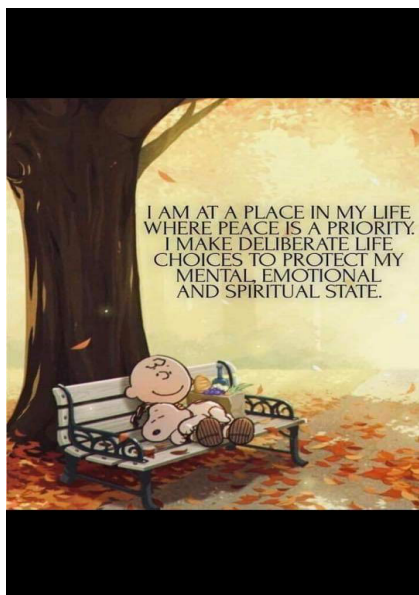
Slow

Here we commit to [slowing down](#) every aspect of our lives.

For this part of the practice I picture myself talking slower, walking slower, washing slower, golfing slower, eating slower, driving slower, thinking slower,....

In my own personal experience, the act of slowing down has not only improved my golf game 😊, it is also materially responsible for the sense of peace and calm that now permeate my day.

Through this practice I have also become more sensitized to the tightness associated with rushing and use it as my signal to ease up and slow myself down.



Smile

Here the practice is simply to bring a half smile to your face, an act that immediately banishes seriousness and self-importance.

In my practice I often envision the semi-historical Chinese monk, [Budai](#), he of fat belly and broad grin featured at the top of this post, and then mentally smile to myself. Doing so immediately softens my mood, puts life into perspective, and compels me to take life much less seriously.

[Smiling](#) is wonderful for us, [even if forced](#), because it releases the feel-good biochemicals dopamine (pleasure), serotonin (calming), and endorphins (pain relief). As an added bonus, [smiling is also contagious](#), and so benefits those around us as well.

Nurturing Optimal Mental Health

In the absence of mind-training practices like CAGPACSS we tend to live life on evolutionary auto-pilot: habitual, unthinking, mindless, and harshly reactive.

Living in this manner, although sadly the norm, is in fact the antithesis of sound mental health and an impediment to finding inner peace.

Fortunately, reflective practices like CAGPACSS provide an easily-accessible path to optimal mental health and help foster the peaceful lives we all seek; lives imbued with an ease of being independent of external circumstances.

In other words, true peace.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

P.S. To access a handy two-page summary of the CAGPACSS meditation suitable for printing, click on [this link](#).

WISDOM



Chapter 11: KEY MINDFULNESS TEACHINGS

When I first started to explore the topic of mindfulness, I found the process overwhelming and confusing. There was just so much out there with much of it not geared to my then-novice level of understanding and experience.

Fortunately, with time, practice, and much diligent study, I was able to tease out the core teachings. I present them here, in plain English, to spare you from having to start from scratch like I did!

Required: Reflection, Contemplation, and Self-Discovery

In my experience, fully grasping the wisdom behind spiritual teachings requires regular periods of quiet reflection and contemplation - it just does.

And why this is true is that only in moments of stillness are we receptive to the deeper lessons that mere words struggle to convey. Most, if not all, "Aha! Now I get it!!!" moments are experienced when our minds are still.

Of equal importance, ***you must personally put the teachings to the test and assess for yourself if the lessons presented ring true.***

Why? *Because wisdom cannot be taught, only seen and experienced.*

"Such knowledge can't be grasped intellectually. It is something that has to be realized and uncovered from within your own consciousness."

Sydney Banks, "The Enlightened Gardener"

Ten Key Mindfulness Teachings

#1: Resisting reality leads to needless suffering

American meditation teacher, Shinzen Young, is credited with coming up with this insightful equation:

$$\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$$

Let's look at each component to help clarify the important point being made:

Pain

Here we are referring not just to physical pain but include other experiences such as:

- losing something of importance to you.
- the death of a loved one.
- having your deeply-held opinions and beliefs challenged.

So, a sore arm is pain, the death of a beloved pet is pain, the destruction of a treasured family heirloom is pain, the loss of a job is pain, and on and on.

What each of these have in common is twofold: 1) They have occurred - they are already reality. 2) They are an inextricable part of life that cannot be escaped.

In short, everyone born into this world will experience pain and there is nothing that can be done about it - we all get sick, we all eventually die, and we all will experience loss of some kind.

Resistance

We tend to **cling** to the parts of life we like, not wanting to see them end - a pleasant vacation, a close friendship, a shiny new car, the way things used to be done at work before stupid changes by management, etc., etc., etc.

Conversely, we tend to feel **aversion** toward the parts of life we don't like, wanting to escape from them as quickly as possible.

However, both *clinging* and *aversion* represent **resistance** - an unwillingness to face up to reality, to face up to what already IS.

Pain is a reality of life. It is non-negotiable, non-escapable and, therefore, futile to resist. Yet we persist in trying, to our psychological detriment.

Suffering

Suffering is the consequence of resisting the reality of an unpleasant situation. *It is the mental anguish we experience when we try to resist pain, try to resist what IS, try to resist reality.*

As the equation shows, without resistance to pain, there is no suffering. Yes, the pain will still be there, *but you won't add needless, pointless, psychological suffering to an already unpleasant situation.* **Resistance just makes matters worse.**

The good news is that while pain is a fact of life, *suffering is optional* - it's completely up to you.

This is an uplifting, freeing observation because it means that your mental well-being is in your own hands - you get to *choose* peace of mind over mental anguish.

But, as pointed out above, don't just take my word for it, test the truth of this for yourself. The next time you get riled up or find yourself complaining about something, see if the essence of your upset is not, in fact, simply your resistance to reality.

So, what's the alternative then? **Acceptance!**

Pain is a reality of life. Resist this reality and you will suffer! So, the only sane way forward is to accept this reality, accept the fact that you are faced with an unpleasant situation, **and then just deal with it.**

In other words, you simply respond to a painful situation in a calm, collected, matter-of-fact manner, because *getting upset adds nothing of value.*

Indeed, getting upset just makes an already unpleasant situation worse. It drags you down as well as all those around you.

But that's not the end of it. In an upset state you are not able to think clearly - your reactive amygdala has taken you over and your wise frontal cortex has gone off-line. As a result, in a state of agitation, you are perfectly primed to say and do things that prove utterly regrettable. In addition, with your creativity temporarily compromised, you will struggle to come up with solutions to whatever problematic issues you may be facing.

"Always say 'yes' to the present moment. What could be more futile, more insane, than to create inner resistance to what already is? What could be more insane than to oppose life itself, which is now and always now?"

Surrender to what is, say 'yes' to life and see how life suddenly starts working for you rather than against you."

Eckhart Tolle, "The Power of Now"

The lesson here, then, is that **there are no "problems", simply situations to be dealt with**. Indeed, it has been said that life's challenges are nothing more than glorious opportunities to put mindfulness into actual practice!

And one final but important point; *acceptance does not mean passivity* - you can still stand up for yourself and take steps to better your situation - but you do so from a position of calm wisdom rather than habitual, unthinking reaction; the outcome will be all the better for it.

"Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them – that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like."

Lao Tse – Chinese philosopher, circa 500 B.C.

#2: Impermanence is a fact of life

Impermanence is a key component of reality. It means that all things, all situations, everything, both good and bad, eventually come to an end; *nothing* stays the same forever.

When it comes to the things we enjoy in life, we know that resisting their eventual loss *will* lead to needless suffering.

If you resist the truth of impermanence, you will be constantly mourning the loss of the things you enjoy and clamoring for new pleasures to take their place - only to have these taken from you as well. This is an obsessive, restless, anxiety-inducing cycle that has no end.

The alternative? To simply enjoy the pleasant parts of life while they're around, but don't cling to them. When their time is up, have the wisdom to *let them go*.

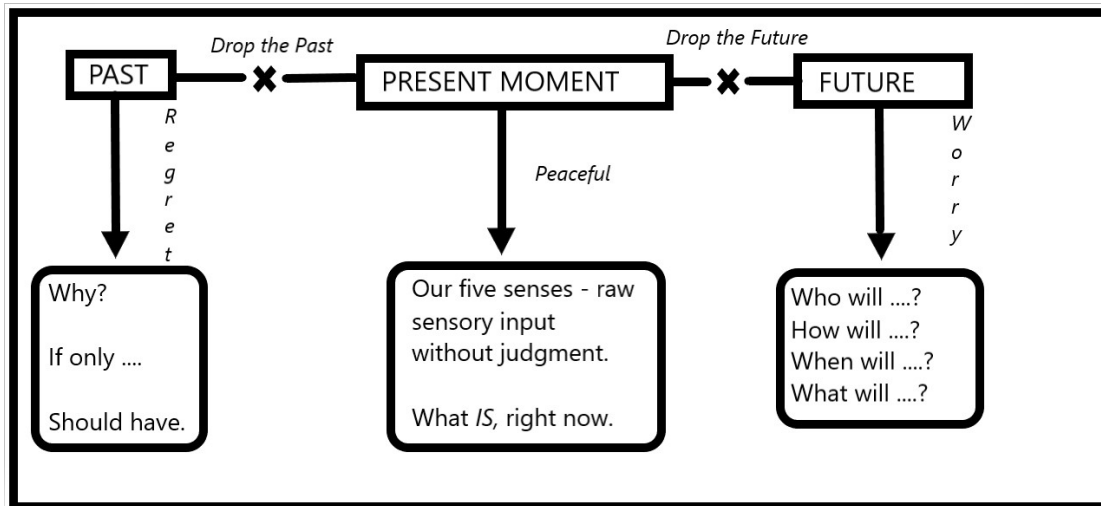
As for the unpleasant parts of life, simply accept them as inevitable and deal with them mindfully. And take solace in the fact that, in due time, impermanence will take these from you as well.

"Time is a sort of river of passing events and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place; and this too will be swept away."

Marcus Aurelius - Roman emperor, 161AD - 181AD

#3: A mind focused on the past or the future is an anxious mind

As referenced in Chapter 2 ("Mental Benefits of Being Mindful"), we are happiest when our attention is focused on the present moment rather than dwelling on an unchangeable past or fretting about or rushing to get to the future.



If something can be done about a past event that will make things better in the present, then do it, because rumination just leads to needless stress.

As for the future, it causes us angst in two ways:

1. When we fixate on all the many things we have to do.
2. When we rush to get somewhere or complete something.

In the first case, we can only think about and work on one thing at a time. Trying to do otherwise just causes stress. Better to just focus on each task in turn.

And if they don't all get done? Well, the sun will still rise tomorrow, your family and friends will still love you, and the world will keep on turning. In other words, we've got to [keep life in perspective](#). *We're just not that important.*

As for rushing, doing so implies that the future we're fixated on is better than the present.

But is it really? And is it not true that as soon as we reach that frantically-sought-after future point, there's always another one? When do we actually get to live *right now*?

And always rushing to the future comes at a real cost:

1. ***The small joys of life become invisible to us.***
2. ***Everything becomes an obstacle, one frustration after another.***
3. ***Rushing triggers our stress response*** because our mind thinks we're in danger. Under stress we're anxious, unpleasant, and not thinking clearly. And if we're always rushing, chronic stress compromises our physical well-being.

The better alternative?:

- Stay focused on the present moment and just deal with whatever life presents in a calm, wise manner.
- Keep life in perspective. Nothing is that important that it should be permitted to ruin even one moment of your life.

"Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry - all forms of fear - are caused by too much future and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of non-forgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence."

Eckhart Tolle

"Changing the filter, wiping noses, going to meetings, picking up around the house, washing dishes, checking the dipstick - don't let yourself think that these are distracting you from your more serious pursuits. Such a round of chores is not a set of difficulties we hope to escape - it is our path."

Jon Kabat-Zinn, "[Wherever You Go, There You Are](#)"

#4: External circumstances do not dictate our mood. Rather, it is our thinking about those circumstances that does

How do we know this to be true? After all, is it not obvious that an unpleasant situation puts us in a bad mood? Well, no actually, and here's why.

First, consider two people exposed to the exact same situation; they will experience it differently, sometimes materially differently. For example, one person's fear of public speaking is another person's exciting opportunity - only their thinking differs.

Or consider this scenario. You are driving to work when someone abruptly and dangerously cuts you off. You feel a rush of anger and lay on the horn to express your feelings of outrage. At the next red light, you leer over at them in disgust.

But then you realize - *it's your mother behind the wheel!*

What happens to your anger and outrage? It vanishes, *and all that has changed are your thoughts about the situation.*

We've all experienced this. You're dealing with a difficult situation and are in a low mood. The next day a caring friend calls on you to see how you're feeling and you respond, *"I'm in a better frame of mind today, thanks. I'm doing fine."*

Being in a "better frame of mind" isn't the result of the situation changing. The only thing that has changed is your thinking *about* the situation. With the benefit of time, distance, and a chance to calm an over-active mind, healthier thoughts displace unhelpful thinking.

In her [article](#) titled, "*Do You Ever Get Upset?*", Dr. Judy Sedgeman makes the point that negative feelings are simply the result of negative thoughts - nothing to get upset about or try to figure out. If you let the negative thoughts flow on by and don't latch on to them, wiser thoughts will soon take their place.

"So often times it happens, that we live our lives in chains, and we never even know we have the key."

The Eagles from their 1974 hit song, "[Already Gone](#)"

So, the main lessons are this:

1. We are in control of our thoughts; our thoughts are not in control of us. We get to decide what to think about any given situation. Change our thinking and we change our perception - it's that simple.
2. It's all just thoughts, and thoughts can't hurt us.
3. By letting our mind settle into a calm stillness, troubling thoughts are soon replaced by better, wiser, healthier thoughts.

"External problems do not generally damage our bodies directly. What harms us is our psychological response to those circumstances; not the state of our environment, but of our mind. And that is something we can control."

Jo Marchant, "[Cure - A Journey into the Science of Mind Over Body](#)"

Of course, none of this is actually simple because we've been conditioned by society to react habitually and unthinkingly to unpleasant situations. Turn on any television drama and what do you encounter? People lashing out at each other in mindless anger.

It takes mindfulness practice to undo this tired, stale, unhelpful way of dealing with life's challenges and substitute in its place the ability to respond with a calm wisdom.

Responding in this manner achieves a number of beneficial outcomes:

1. It helps us keep things in proper perspective.
2. It helps us preserve relationships rather than put them under severe strain.
3. It helps us spread peace and goodwill rather than aggression.

It's our choice.

"Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens."

Khalil Gibran - Lebanese poet, 1883 - 1931

#5: When faced with an unpleasant situation we have three sane choices

In his book, "[The Power of Now](#)", spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle lays out three *sane* choices when faced with an unpleasant situation:

1. **Change the situation** (if you can and if this is the wisest way forward).
2. **Remove yourself from the situation** (if you can and if this is the wisest way forward).
3. If you can neither change the situation nor remove yourself from it, then **accept it as if you had chosen it.**

As he astutely puts it, "all else is madness".

Why madness? Because all other options entail resisting reality, resisting what IS, and this we know to be the path of needless suffering.

What then is this madness? *Choosing* to inflict suffering upon yourself!

"If there is no solution to the problem, then don't waste time worrying about it. If there is a solution to the problem, then don't waste time worrying about it."

Dalai Lama XIV

#6: A "brain on fire" yields no wisdom

By "brain on fire" (BOF) I mean an agitated state of mind brought on by situations we don't like. Here are some examples:

- BOF = How you feel as you're speeding in your car to get somewhere.
- BOF = How you feel as you impatiently look at your watch, over and over again, while stuck in a long, slow-moving grocery line.
- BOF = How you feel while having a spat with your spouse.
- BOF = Dejectedly thinking about all the tasks that await you upon your return to work after a great vacation.

An agitated state of mind is brought on by the oldest part of our brain, the amygdala. When alerted to danger, it is responsible for triggering our self-protection 'fight-flight-freeze' mechanism.

Unfortunately, it isn't smart enough to be able to distinguish true danger from simple anger or frustration.

Awful physical health implications aside, this wouldn't necessarily be a problem were it not for one thing - under the influence of our amygdala *our wisdom goes off-line*.

By this I mean that the amygdala over-rides the wise part of our brain, the pre-frontal cortex (PFC), the locus of our executive functioning - emotional control, impulse control, and creativity.

As a result, under the influence of our amygdala we become reactionary rather than wisely responsive.

Why are we set up this way? Because if we are in a true life-threatening situation, we don't have the luxury of wisely pondering our best course of action, we must react instinctively and unthinkingly.

However, in the absence of real danger, reacting unthinkingly when simply angered or frustrated serves only to make an already unpleasant situation worse.

So, what can we do about this? Because our PFC is only accessible when we are calm, we use mindfulness practice in two ways:

1. To sensitize us to the first signs of mental upset - a flush of heat (as the blood flows to our muscles), a tightening of the jaw and muscles, a furrowing of the brow, an empty feeling in the pit of our stomach (as the blood flows away from your organs to your muscles), a dry mouth, rapid breathing, and a pounding heart. These are the cues that our wisdom is about to go off-line.

2. To immediately pause, breathe deeply and slowly, relax our muscles, and smile to regain perspective.

Doing so slows down our thinking and re-accesses our PFC and its wisdom. In a clearer state of mind, we avoid the normal, but decidedly unhelpful, habitual, and unthinking reaction to life.

In short, **nothing good comes from reacting to life. Much good comes from responding to it.**

The corollary of this teaching is that whenever you find yourself embroiled in a situation with someone whose own brain is on fire, know fully that *they are not in a state of mind to listen to reason.*

For example, a teenager throwing a tantrum has BOF and so is not *able* to listen to what you have to say because they are under the powerful influence of their amygdala.

So, in such a situation, it is best to give the other person time to calm down so they can re-access their PFC. Only then will you be able to have an intelligent exchange of views about the situation at hand.

"It's extremely important to widen the gap between impulse and action, and that's exactly what mindfulness does ... it gives us a moment or two ... where we can change our relationship to our experience, not be caught in it and swept away by impulse, but rather to see that there's an opportunity here to make a different, better choice."

Daniel Goleman, author of "[Emotional Intelligence](#)"

#7 - Don't supply fuel to negative thoughts and they will dissipate of their own accord

A brain creates thoughts all on its own; it's what it's designed to do. And given our documented [negativity-bias](#), many of those thoughts tend to be unhelpful and anxiety-inducing.

But you are not your brain, and you are not your thoughts. **Your conscious awareness is separate from both.** And because of this, with practice in mindful awareness, you can go from being the *slave* of your thoughts to simply being the *observer* of your thoughts.

Here is an analogy often used to help clarify this point:

Your thoughts are like a waterfall and you are an observer safely standing behind it, just watching the water cascading in front of you. As an observer, the waterfall can't hurt you. In the same way, your thoughts can't hurt you either, provided you just observe them and don't get caught up in their cascade.

Supplying fuel to a negative thought means to latch on to it and follow its story line wherever it leads you. We've all experienced this - we make up lengthy conversations and stories, and all of it entirely in our own mind!

So, when a negative thought occurs, try this:

1. **Call it out for what it is.** Say to yourself, "I'm feeling anxious" or "I'm feeling envious" or whatever negative feeling the thought has conjured up. Alternatively, speak to the thought directly: "Hello anger, I see you're back again." By calling such thoughts out and putting a name to them you are shining the light of conscious awareness on them, and they lose their hold on you.
2. **Let the negative thought go.** How? By changing the focus of your attention using one of the informal mindfulness practices outlined in Chapter 4 ("*How to be Mindful*"). Studies find that if you don't give attention to a thought for a few short moments, it will dissipate of its own accord. In a calmer, wiser state of mind, healthier thoughts will take its place. Alternatively, imagine the thought is inside a soap bubble floating at eye level. In your mind's eye watch it rise up, and up, and up and then - 'pop' - gone. Then turn your mind to a healthier line of thinking.

And always remember that thoughts have no intrinsic existence - they are just ephemeral biochemical reactions going on inside your head - just a routine bodily process.

#8 - Making assumptions about other people's behaviour is the path to needless personal upset and inter-personal conflict

When someone does something that upsets us, we typically assume we know why they did it:

1. "because he's lazy"
2. "because she's stupid"
3. "because he's selfish and only thinks about himself"
4. "because he doesn't care about her welfare"
5. "because she thinks her time is more important than anyone else's"

In doing so we are making these implicit assumptions:

1. That our beliefs and world views are correct.
2. That our beliefs and world views are universally held.
3. That others should act in the same manner we would in that same situation. Further, they should know better because we sure as heck would never do what they just did.

Of course, the critical flaw in this line of thinking is that we're *not* all the same and, therefore, do *not* have the same beliefs or world views.

Factors impacting human behaviour are innumerable, encompassing influences such as genes, genetic abnormalities, hormones, social environment, social standing, past traumas, cultural background, personal experiences, parental upbringing, age, sex, etc., etc. Unique combinations of such factors guarantee unique behaviour from each of us. No surprise then that we're often baffled by others' behaviour.

Another critical flaw in assuming we know why another person did something is that there is every chance that they don't even know this themselves.

But how could this be? Well, it appears to be the case that the left hemisphere of the brain serves as an interpreter of our actions; we act in some manner and then it makes up a story to help us make sense of what we just did.

In his fascinating book, "[Incognito - The Secret Lives of the Brain](#)", neuroscientist David Eagleman offers these cautionary words for those who want to know the "why?" behind human behaviour:

"We have ways of retrospectively telling stories about our actions as though the actions were always our idea. It has been concluded that the left hemisphere of the brain acts as an interpreter, watching the actions and behavior of the body and then assigning a coherent narrative to these events. Hidden programs drive actions and the left hemisphere makes justifications.

It can be disquieting to consider the extent to which all of our actions are driven by hardwired systems while we overlay stories about our choices."

As a result, while you may get an answer to "Why did you do that?", don't be surprised if it doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

So, is there a wiser way forward? Here are three approaches to consider:

1. Let It Go

If it's just not that important - **and most issues aren't** - just let it go. Life is way too short to be wasting any of it over trivialities.

2. Make a Better Assumption

If you're capable of making a negative assumption, you're also capable of making a positive assumption. After all, they're both just make-believe stuff you cobbled together in your head.

So, perhaps the young woman on the bus who appears to be willfully ignoring her wailing child is, in fact, grieving the loss of her spouse. That may be unlikely, but it's not impossible, so why not go with the latter assumption and save yourself needless agitation? After all, it's your choice what to think about any given situation.

3. Use Non-Violent Communication

If the situation is important enough for you to take action, try this approach known as "[Non-Violent Communication](#)", developed by the late Marshall Rosenberg, known for his work in international peace negotiations:

1. In non-judgmental language, convey to the "offender" what action of theirs you have observed.
2. Let them know how these actions make you feel.
3. Let them know what specific needs of yours are not being met in relation to those actions that have led you to feel this way.
4. Let them know what you are wanting from them to address this situation so that your needs may be met and if they could see their way to doing so.
5. Ask them how they observe the situation, how they feel about it, and what their needs are.
6. If there are conflicting needs, come to an agreeable compromise.

What you *don't* want to do is to ask the "Why?" question. *"So, Johnny, why did you leave your dirty hockey equipment in the hallway for everyone to trip over?"*

This is the road to needless conflict because asking someone to explain their behaviour is accusatory, feels like an interrogation, and conveys a sense of fait accompli, that they've already been found guilty as charged.

And what do accused people do? They defend themselves or counter-attack, neither of which will prove helpful for resolving a conflict.

"Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness and drama."

Don Miguel Ruiz, author of "[The Four Agreements](#)"

"One of the great misconceptions we often carry throughout our lives is that our perceptions of ourselves and the world are basically accurate and true, that they reflect some stable, ultimate reality. This misconception leads to tremendous suffering, both globally and in our personal life situations."

Joseph Goldstein, "[Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening](#)"

#9 - Taking things personally leads to needless conflict and self-inflicted hurt

What someone else says about you or thinks about you, positively or negatively, is all about *them*, not about you; it is about your behaviour filtered through *their* belief system - their "shoulds", "ought tos", and "musts".

How do we know this? Because two different people sizing you up as a person can come up with two very different opinions, one good and one bad - and both can't be true.

Former U.S. President, Donald Trump, is a prime example of this. Some voters wanted him impeached while others idolized him. But he's just one person and those two opinions are not compatible. So, it's not about Donald Trump, *it's about each voter's personal belief system.*

So, don't get upset over nasty things others say to you or about you because it's got nothing to do with you, but everything to do with them.

By the same token, don't get your chest all puffed out when people say nice things about you - because that's all about them too (and not everyone agrees with them)!

“There is a huge amount of freedom that comes to you when you take nothing personally.”

Don Miguel Ruiz

#10 - Your happiness is 100% your own responsibility and comes from within

This is a corollary of #4, this being that it is not external circumstances that dictate whether we're happy or sad, rather, it is our thinking *about* those circumstances that does.

If your happiness depends on what other people think of you then you've got a miserable life ahead of you because you've just made yourself into a helpless victim - ***your happiness is dependent on factors outside of your control.***

Similarly, if your happiness is contingent on being immersed in pleasant circumstances - enjoying a vacation, buying things, taking in a movie - **then you're guaranteed repeated episodes of abject unhappiness** because life isn't an unbroken string of pleasantries. No, life also includes the mundane and the unpleasant - doing the laundry, getting stuck in traffic, shoveling the driveway, nursing a cold, and going to the dentist.

True happiness is independent of external circumstances and comes from being mindful - living fully in the present moment and taking joy from life's simplest moments - even doing the laundry!

It all boils down to what we choose to think about our circumstances. ***Happiness is a choice - and so is suffering.***

It follows from all of this that it is *not* the responsibility of your spouse, or your parents, siblings, friends, or co-workers to make you happy - ***that's totally up to you.***

By the same token, you are not, and cannot be, responsible for others' happiness - that is totally up to them.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 12: KEEPING LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE

In the final years of my career as a personal financial advisor I had the good fortune to work on the seventh floor of an office tower that afforded expansive views in every direction. From my desk I could see the peak of the Peace Tower some eight kilometres away, such was the low-build nature of Ottawa at that time.

Passing by that building is the 417 Expressway connecting Orleans in the east to Kanata in the west, Ottawa proper being roughly equidistant between the two.

During my not-infrequent breaks to window-gaze, I would contemplate the mind-sets of all those thousands of commuters and truckers speeding by, each on their own little Mission Impossible.

And I would wonder to myself, ***do we not take our own little lives, our own little thoughts, and our own little spheres of personal life events far too seriously? Do we not tend to focus on the minutiae of life rather than taking an expansive view of its big picture?***

I believe we very much do; which would be rather inconsequential were it not for the serious implications.

We appear to be making ourselves miserable and, as a direct consequence, mentally and physically ill with all the anxious rushing around we do to fulfill all those "important" items on our perpetually-refreshed to-do list.

To no surprise, two of the leading causes of lost time at work these days are stress and depression.

The message of this post is that, yes, we should take time to care for one another and contribute as best we can toward a well-functioning society.

But we should do so with an un-rushed ease of being and a deep humility born of knowing, fully and completely, that what we each do each day is, at once, *both important and profoundly and singularly unimportant*.

Understanding the seeming incompatibility of this duality requires but one thing: *a broader perspective on life than we normally afford it*.

So, in that vein, here are a few mind-and-perspective-altering thoughts to contemplate.

Our to-do list and "problems" from a [universal perspective](#)

If you could charter a spacecraft capable of traveling at the speed of light (~300,000 kilometres per second) you would be able to circumnavigate the earth at its equator (~40,000 kilometres) in about *one-tenth of a second*.

By way of comparison, a typical commercial jet flies at about 900 kph and so would need about *44 hours* to complete that same journey.

So, wow, light is pretty darned fast! Yes, indeed it is. However, even if you were able to travel at the speed of light, in order to reach the outer edge of the *observable* universe you had better pack a good-sized lunch - because it's going to take you roughly **47 BILLION YEARS**.

But we're only talking the "*observable*" universe here (i.e. the furthest light can have traveled since the time of the Big Bang, some 13.8 billion years ago). Taking this limitation into account, scientists at Oxford University in Britain have estimated that the full scale of the universe is about 250 times larger than what we can currently observe.

So, that little trip of yours to the edge of the universe at the speed of light? Well, better get comfy, because you're in for a journey lasting, oh, about *12 TRILLION YEARS*.

And then there's our so-very-important to-do list. Hmmmmm.

And to think that blood is being tragically shed over specks of land that, from a universal perspective, aren't even the size of sub-atomic particles.

And then, of course, there's always that neighbour who gets upset because some of "your" fall leaves blew on to "his" side of the property line right after he had finished raking.

And on and on this silliness goes, due in large part to an utter lack of perspective.

Humbling Hubble

Here is a photograph taken by the Hubble space telescope. It shows a field of view roughly the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length.



Those dots of light? Well, they're all galaxies - thousands of them - and each one has hundreds of billions of stars.

In the observable universe there are an estimated **100 BILLION GALAXIES**.

This puts the number of stars in our observable universe at roughly 1 BILLION TRILLION, also known as 1 SEXTILLION or, in scientific notation, 1×10^{21} stars. Earth circles around exactly one of them, and a rather mundane one at that.

And then there's us, rushing around frantically on the little speck of cosmic dust we call Earth attending to our very important issues. Hmmmmm.

"Time" to Regain Perspective

The universe is estimated to have come into existence at the time of the Big Bang, roughly 13.8 billion years ago.

Out of this cosmic soup, the Earth coalesced about 4.5 billion years ago.

It took about 500 million years for conditions to cool and change sufficiently to support Earth's first life forms, this occurring about 3.5 billion years ago.

Dinosaurs appeared on the scene about 240 million years ago and stuck around for roughly 170 million years; until that unfortunate asteroid incident.

The first mammals made their appearance about 65 million years ago and eventually, out of this lineage, came us Homo Sapiens, roughly 200,000 years ago.

So, let's put our species' experience to date into some context:

- In our total history as a species, we have only been in existence for about *0.12% of the time that dinosaurs managed*. Given our propensity for war and aggression, I'm thinking the dinosaurs have a lock on that record.
- At an average adult stride, it would take someone 66 million steps (and a formidable aptitude for holding their breath under water) to walk around the Earth at the equator. If we take this number of steps to represent the age of the universe, then a human living for 90 years is only on this Earth for 220 steps, or about 130 metres of the 40,000 kilometres it takes to make it around the Earth.
- To put the previous point a different way, if the age of the universe were condensed down to one year, a human living for 90 years experiences their entire life passing by in roughly *two-tenths of a second*.

In other words, while our time on Earth may seem long from our tragically-limited perspective, on a cosmic scale it is but a blink of an eye - *and then it's over*.

Given the fleeting nature of our existence, how wise is it to devote *any* of this precious time fussing over our oh-so-important "problems"?

Nothing New Under the Sun

Over the two-hundred millennia that we humans have been around, roughly 109 billion of us have died.

This means that *109 billion of us* have experienced the full suite of human sorrows - the loss of loved ones, sickness, injury, to say nothing of those sorrows brought on by human ignorance; hunger, thirst, war, physical and mental assault, forced displacement, subjugation, prejudice, injustice, intolerance, greed, and so on and so on.

As we learned in Chapter 11 ("*Key Mindfulness Teachings*"), such pains are simply a part of life; resist them and you *will* suffer. Seen from a broader perspective, it's rather clear that our personal "problems" are hardly the stuff of legend; nothing to get worked up over - simply to be dealt with, mindfully.

You - Miracle!

It may sound trite to describe life as a miracle. Certainly, on our most challenging days, it feels more like a burden than a miracle.

But it's true - your mere existence, your coming into being, is indeed miraculous. And here's why.

Let's take a look at just a small portion of the long chain of events that had to go *exactly your way* for you to come into being:

- Your mom and dad had to live long enough to make it to their reproductive years.
- Your mom had to meet your dad. Of all the men she could have met, what are the odds of meeting just the right guy to make *you*?
- Of course, meeting is one thing, but hitting it off sufficiently well to want to date each other? What are those odds?
- Okay, your folks are dating, but now they've got to want to turn it into a long-term relationship. Odds?
- So, they decide to stick together and manage to do so long enough to have a child - *you*.
- But for *you* to come into existence, the *exact* sperm and *exact* egg had to meet and successfully link up. The odds of this? Given the sperm count of the average male, roughly 1 chance in ten to the power of seventeen. Let's just say that if this were the odds of winning a door prize, you could be waiting a *really* long time!
- Now extend this process out to take into account your grandparents and great grandparents and great-great grandparents, on and on back through every ancestor since the first human came into existence, some 10,000 generations ago.

Only this EXACT chain of events could lead to YOU!

In the fascinating [article](#) where I first encountered this analysis, the odds are put at ***one chance in 10 raised to the power of 2,685,000!*** That's a one followed by 2,685,000 zeroes!

To put this crazy big number into perspective, it is estimated that the total number of atoms in the known universe is roughly 10 raised to the power of 80. So, your odds of coming into being are *way* lower than having to pick the correct card from a deck consisting of 1×10^{80} cards!

Put another way, your existence is the equivalent of 2 million people getting together, each given a trillion-sided die, and with one roll *they all turn up the exact same number*, say 550,343,279,001.

In other words, the probability of YOUR existence? Essentially NIL.

I like the way the article's author puts it:

"A miracle is an event so unlikely as to be almost impossible. By definition, each of you – and all living things – are miracles. I think this is something to be grateful for."

Sort of puts our oh-so-important to-do lists and "problems" in a different perspective, does it not?

Oh, What a Lucky Man He Was

In its [2022 Global Wealth Report](#), wealth manager Credit Suisse broke down the distribution of wealth among the world's adults. Here is what they report:

- 53% of adults have a net worth under \$10,000 US dollars (USD).
- 87% have a net worth under \$100,000 USD. In other words, if you have a net worth greater than \$100,000 USD, you stand among the richest 13% of all adults alive today.
- If you are fortunate enough to have a net worth greater than \$1 million USD, you have more personal wealth than 98.8% of all adults alive today.

In my home country of Canada, we are fortunate indeed; median wealth among adults comes in at \$140,000 USD. In other words, more than half of Canadian adults can count themselves among the richest 13% of all adults in the entire world.

To put this into perspective, India, with some one billion adults, has median wealth of just \$3,300 USD, while China, with some 1.1 billion adults, has median wealth of only \$26,000 USD.

And the U.S. itself? Well, its median adult wealth is only about 66% of that of Canada's, coming in at \$93,000 USD.

So, if you're a Canadian adult reading this post, it's highly likely that you have much to be thankful for and precious little, if anything, to be fussed about.

Taking Things for Granted

If you, like me, happen to have had the great good fortune to be born into one of the Western democracies, it is all too easy to take our favored lot in life for granted. From our limited perspective it is easy for us to forget that our lives are not the norm; in fact, *far from it*.

Here's a broader perspective:

- % of the world living in a [free society](#): 20%
- % of the world living in an autocracy: 25%
- % of the world who are [malnourished](#): 11% (vs. 39% overweight)
- % of the world with no electricity: 13%
- % of the world with inadequate shelter: 20%
- % of the world without safe water: 33%
- % of the world without proper sanitation: 46%
- % of the world living on <\$1.90 USD/day: 9%

What message do we take from these statistics? That the next time we're inclined to complain about some discomfoting aspect of our lives, perhaps we should, instead, take a moment to reflect on just how truly lucky we are and how much we have to be grateful for.

Nothing Really Matters

Here I present two facts that, while depressing to contemplate, nonetheless help put our often-frantic lives and "problems" into perspective.

The Cemetery Perspective

Pass by any cemetery and ponder if there are *any* friends or relatives still alive to remember who these people were, let alone know the details of their lives.

For most of them, much beyond grandchildren is a stretch. In many instances great-great grandparents are little more than a footnote on a genealogy list, in the rare case that one even exists.

The point here is that, in a relatively short span of time, our perceived self-importance and rushing to achieve life's goals and tasks *amounts to absolutely nothing*.

No one is going to remember or care that we put in crazy long overtime in our job. No one is going to remember or care that in 2016 we arrived at our folk's place for Christmas at 2:13pm by dangerously speeding down the highway rather than doing the speed limit and arriving at 4:02pm.

At the time these would have seemed important to us and, in the absence of mindfulness, would likely have been accompanied by needless anxiety and frustration. But with the benefit of time, distance, and wisdom, we see our folly.

Much of life, if not all of it, follows this same pattern; seemingly so important at the time but, ultimately, amounting to pretty much nothing at all.

The Red Giant Perspective

In about five billion years or so our sun will have spent much of its nuclear fuel and begun its transition into a Red Giant, the dying phase of a star of its type.

One of the main features of a Red Giant is its massive expansion, growing some 100 to 1000 times in size, sufficiently large in the case of our sun as to likely engulf the Earth, thus destroying everything in its wake.

At that point, assuming the continued existence of our species and barring the invention of mega-scale inter-planetary travel, all of human history will be forever extinguished.

What, then, to make of our "important" earthly tasks and "problems"?

Life in perspective

The truth of our existence is this: **that most, if not all, of what we perceive to be important or to be a "problem" is, in reality, little more than a triviality.**

And the alternative? *To just lighten up and stop taking ourselves, and life, so darned seriously.*

As the 70's band [Trooper](#)'s lyrics put it, "We're here for a good time, not a long time, so have a good time, the sun can't shine every day".

And how do we go about having this "good time" in the face of life's difficulties and challenges?

Here, ***an invaluable trait to foster is the ability to laugh at oneself, to laugh at life's inevitable trials and tribulations, and to smile inside whenever we come face-to-face with hardship and challenge.***

Remember from Chapter 11 ("*Key Mindfulness Teachings*") that pain is non-negotiable, just a part of life, but adding suffering to that pain, well, that's our choice.

If you actively nurture this mentality, the ability to laugh at and take lightly *whatever* life presents, you will find that your life magically smooths out, an ease of being sets in, and you will find yourself responding to life with your innate wisdom rather than unthinkingly reacting to it as is our near-universal habit.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

P.S. Credit to my wonderful and talented friend Julie for the beautiful rose portion of this post's featured image! Thank you, Julie!!



Chapter 13: DOING vs. BEING

"The impulse frequently arises in me to squeeze another this or another that into this moment. I have learned to identify this impulse and mistrust it. I work hard at saying no to it. It conspires with my mind to keep me unconscious. It has me unavailable to others at those times, missing the play of light on the table, the smells in the room."

Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of "[Wherever You Go, There You Are](#)"

We appear to be a society of pathological **DOERS** whose every waking moment needs to be filled to the brim with some form of activity or attentional diversion.

How ridiculously pathetic is it that even I, now a carefree retiree, often find myself questioning moments of inactivity, wondering if such idle time wouldn't be better spent DOING something!

I notice that a measure of guilt and low-grade agitation tend to accompany such moments as I catch myself mentally cycling through a list of potential activities that could help fill the void.

At such times it actually takes effort to spurn such thoughts and just settle back into doing absolutely nothing of note or import.

Of course, it doesn't help that there's always *that* question: "So, Rob, now that you're retired, what are you DOING?" How silly is it that part of me feels pressured - almost obligated - to come up with an interesting response!

I don't recall my father or grandfather having to face this issue. In their day there was no expectation of exotic travel or absorbing hobbies or humanitarian volunteering or any other keep-yourself-interestingly-busy undertakings - they simply retired - and the basic flow of their lives just continued.

It is surely telling that homes back then routinely came equipped with generous porches - a place of rest specifically designed to accommodate idleness; a spot to just sit, pass the time, and watch the world go by. In other words, to just *be*.

And what have we managed to turn that pleasingly sedate world into? A place where the act of doing nothing actually requires effort and willpower!

“The meaning of life is just to be alive. It is so plain and so obvious and so simple. And yet, everybody rushes around in a great panic as if it were necessary to achieve something beyond themselves.”

Alan Watts, British writer and philosopher (1915 -1973)

This Isn't to Say That Doing Is Always Bad

Now don't get me wrong, societal progress and its betterment - poverty reduction, improved health and safety, a better-educated populace, to say nothing of the greater wealth necessary to fund such initiatives - all require "doing".

No, what I'm talking about isn't the evil of doing but, rather, **the lack of balance between doing and simply "being" that is in evidence today.**

Some examples come to mind:

- **Cell phone addiction** - while of unquestionable benefit to society, in far too many instances these wonderful devices appear to function mainly as adult pacifiers, sparing the user from having to otherwise engage with their environment.
- **Structured-play addiction** - back in my day my only structured play was baseball in the summer, to which I cycled to get to the games. In winter, I and the neighborhood kids played road hockey in front of my folks' house (an activity now sadly banned in a number of Canadian cities). During high school I spent many an evening simply hanging out with friends on a street corner about three blocks away from our home. To my knowledge, despite this slow-paced existence, all of us turned out to be productive, law-abiding, contributing citizens. Fast forward to today and it is not unusual for a child to be enrolled in multiple structured activities, most of which necessitate being driven somewhere. I'll leave it to you to assess which approach to life best fosters mindfulness.
- **Work addiction** - my dad was a machinist for Ontario Hydro for over forty years. He would start at 7:30am sharp and religiously finish at 4pm, leaving more than enough time for a periodic round of golf in the summer and bowling league in the winter. I too experienced this same certainty in my first job as a mining engineer - day's end meant day's end - none of today's norm for working late or taking work home or working on weekends or while on vacation or over holidays.

And there was no checking of email at all hours of the day (we'll politely skim over the fact that email didn't yet exist at the time I landed my first full-time job! Nonetheless, society somehow managed to function without it - go figure)!

"Before capitalism, most people did not work very long hours at all. The tempo of life was slow, even leisurely; the pace of work relaxed. Our ancestors may not have been rich, but they had an abundance of leisure. When capitalism raised their incomes, it also took away their time."

Juliet Schor, "The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure"

Why Too Much *Doing* and Not Enough *Being* is a Problem

I, for one, find this societal change to be both sad and tragic. Why so? For two reasons:

- First, ***because minds never at rest are, by default, minds never at ease***, and this contributes to the chronic anxiety and unconscious mindlessness prevalent in today's society.
- Second, *under pressure to always be 'doing' we lose the ability to pause, take note of our surroundings, and appreciate the simple joys of life - a newly-opened flower, bird song, passing clouds, the warm glow of dusk and dawn- small but important joys only experienced while simply 'being'.*

"All over the world, people are so caught up in running that they forget to take advantage of the beauty around them. We become so accustomed to speeding ahead that we rob ourselves of these moments of joy."

Being able to appreciate, being able to look closely, being able to open our minds, this is the key."

Pema Chodron, Buddhist nun and author of "When Things Fall Apart"

THE WONDERFUL LIGHTNESS OF BEING

Perhaps I'm guilty of nostalgia for times past, but it strikes me as tragic that the act of simply 'being', while once the norm in pre-industrial times, is today rarely considered a valuable use of one's time.

And what do I mean by *being*? Here are some examples:

- While out hiking in the woods, stopping periodically to ***just listen*** - to the silence; to the breeze through the leaves; to the birds; to the distant buzz of civilization.
- On a rainy day, just sitting and listening to the ping of the drops against the window; watching the waves of water ripple downward.

- While waiting in a lineup or for a bus or plane or cab, putting away your cellphone, turning off your music, putting down your book and simply cycling through your five senses - hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting - actively engaging with your surroundings and simply **noticing**.

"To be mindful is to be in the present, noticing all the wonders that we didn't realize were right in front of us."

Dr. Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University and author of "[Mindfulness](#)"

The Payoff

Why is it beneficial to seek out moments of just 'being'?

Because the focused attention it entails is naturally calming; it slows down our breathing and quiets our useless mind-chatter.

By bringing us back into the present moment, the radical act of choosing to do nothing melts away our anxiety and induces a profound sense of well-being.

In short, ***regularly taking time to just 'be' provides us with true happiness; a happiness not contingent on our circumstances; a happiness we all seek but, in our unthinking busyness and haste, only rarely get to experience.***

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 14: LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

"Slow isn't a speed, it's a state of mind."

Anonymous

Why Are We in Such a Hurry?

Have you ever noticed just how *joyless* life feels when you're in a hurry? And it's joyless because this is how it makes us feel:

When rushing we are grumpy, agitated, self-centered, impatient, judgmental, humorless, intolerant, narrow-minded, mistake-prone, careless, quick to anger, easily frustrated, stressed, overwhelmed, and biased toward perceiving life negatively.

In short, *rushing turns life into a struggle*; every impediment, no matter how minor, feels like a major obstacle thwarting our plans.

Given how miserable rushing makes us feel, *why are we in such a hurry?*

Because We Choose To Be

It was yet another beautifully-warm sunny day in Tobago when my wife and I, basking in the joy of our honeymoon, ventured into a general store in search of some much-needed sun screen.

Staff, friends, and locals were all hanging about, smiling, laughing, chatting - having a wonderful time - but dammit, no one was coming over to serve us!

My wife and I looked at each other in disbelief wondering what the heck was wrong with these people? Can't they see that there are paying customers waiting for them to do their job? Can't they see that they're wasting our time!

Feeling a sense of righteous indignation, I approached one of the staff to ask for service. In a friendly, polite tone she informed me that it was break time.

"Is *everyone* on break at the same time?" I inquired. "Yes sir" came the reply, "It's break time. We'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"Food and grocery shopping in Tobago is an experience that will either bring extreme frustration or a huge smile to your face. Allow lots of time. Shopping on Tobago is not something that can be hurried. Tobago time operates in a different dimension and "hurrying" is a guaranteed way of raising blood pressure and creating tension."

Source: <https://www.mytobago.info/shopping.php>

Ah, vital life lesson learned - **hurrying is a choice!**

Who knew! After all, back home in Canada we all rush around like mad fools much of the time, so I reasonably assumed that this was *just the way life is*.

Well, it's not.

Rushing, hurrying, and impatience are a *choice*. Just because all those around you are losing their heads doesn't mean you have to lose yours too. You can step off the proverbial gerbil treadmill if you so choose.

"For fast-acting relief, try slowing down."

Lily Tomlin, American comedian

Not that this will be easy mind you. After all, in North America at least (if not Tobago!), we've conditioned each other to believe that rushing around is normal - expected almost.

And if you disagree, then just try doing the speed limit one day to see how many frantic drivers are on your tail looking to pass at the first opportunity, often at the risk of life and limb.

"Rushing doesn't save time, it just rearranges it."

Anonymous

Slow is a State of Mind, Not a Speed

Here's the good news; speed on its own is not the problem. You don't have to move like an old man to live life in the slow lane. You can still move or work with alacrity without triggering that awful feeling of being in a hurry.

So, when does *fast* turn into *rushing*? When you become fixated on the future, wanting whatever you're doing in the present moment to end so you can get to some future state.

For example, let's say it's your turn to cook supper, something you don't particularly enjoy. Given this situation, what are you likely to do? Well, if you're like most people, you will probably try to rush through it, likely grumbling about it the entire time.

But therein lies the problem. You're stuck in the present moment (in this instance, having to cook) but wanting to be in the future (perhaps watching TV or reading a good book, pretty much anything other than having to prepare a meal).

In this manner you turn the present moment into an obstacle and make yourself miserable in the process.

"Stress is caused by being 'here' but wanting to be 'there'."

Eckhart Tolle, author of "[The Power of Now](#)"

But here's the thing - you can't get to that, or any, future moment except by living through a string of present moments. Rushing to get anywhere is what "wishing your life away" is all about. And there's a very good reason we're cautioned not to do so - because life is precious - too precious to waste in a state of unconscious agitation.

The simple fact is that life doesn't happen in the future, *life happens in the now*.

Sensing When We're Rushing

How can we tell when *fast* is turning into *rushing*? Whenever we start to feel frantic and impatient.

And we all know that feeling - our muscles tighten, our focus narrows, our five senses dull, we lose our sense of humor, and a life-sucking seriousness sets in.

These are our cues to slow down.

How to Slow Down

Whenever you catch yourself starting to rush, try P.B.S.: Pause, Breathe, Smile.

1. **Pausing** means to momentarily stop *doing* and simply *be*. This helps break our fixation on the future.
2. **Deep slow breathing** coupled with *conscious muscle relaxation* triggers our calming parasympathetic nervous system, shutting down our stress response.
3. **Smiling** terminates our seriousness and helps us regain proper perspective.

The Low Down on Slow Down

Aside from dispensing with the angst brought on by rushing, there are many other beneficial reasons for choosing to live life in the slow lane. Here are a few:

You'll Live Longer and Better

Feeling rushed triggers our stress system - it tricks our body into thinking we're in danger and so need to physically flee. But there's nothing to flee from, *it's just us thinking our way into a snit*.

So, if you're always rushing, then you're always stressed.

But here's the thing, chronic stress reduces life expectancy. So, if you want to die sooner rather than later, rush. *Rushing through life literally does rush you through life!*

And if stress doesn't kill you then there's a good chance it's going to make you seriously ill or worsen an existing condition. Depression, cancer, and cardiovascular disease are but three illnesses linked to stress.

You'll Live Longer Even if You Don't Live Longer

Because rushing renders us unconscious we miss out on much of our life. Think of all those present moments that pass by unnoticed, unremarked, and unappreciated.

Life's small joys become invisible to us when we're rushing. Simply put, if we don't slow down sufficiently to even *notice* that there *are* roses, what hope do we have of actually *smelling* them?

"The trail is the thing, not the end of the trail. Travel too fast, and you miss all you are traveling for."

Louis L'Amour, American novelist (b 1908)

"One of the great ironies of life is that the more one rushes to save time, the more living time one loses to the fog of unconsciousness."

Anonymous

Slowing down to appreciate life's small joys increases our lived life even if it adds not one single second to our physical time on this earth.

You'll be Wiser

The brain's locus of executive functioning is the prefrontal cortex (PFC), located just behind the forehead. It plays a key role in things like impulse control, emotional control, and creative thinking, all part and parcel of what we refer to as wisdom.

But here's the thing - the PFC goes offline under stress. Because rushing triggers our stress response, when you're feeling hurried you lose access to your innate wisdom - you become impulsive, emotional, and struggle to come up with creative solutions to whatever challenges you may be facing.

So, if you wish to be the best *you* at all times you've got to learn how to slow down and become present at the first sign of internal angst. Once calmed, wisdom comes back online.

You'll Have Greater Patience

Rushing breeds impatience which is the antithesis of [being mindful](#). It is not for nothing that patience is considered a virtue.

"Why is patience so important? Because it makes us pay attention."

Paulo Coelho, Brazilian novelist

You'll Respond to Life Rather Than React to It

Slowing down the mind provides just that extra little bit of time to catch ourselves before we say or do something in the heat of the moment that we later regret.

Living life in the slow lane provides the opportunity to respond intelligently to life rather than react to it unthinkingly.

You'll Be a Nicer Person

As referenced above, rushing tends to turn us into decidedly unpleasant individuals, easily agitated, quick to anger, and not a whole lot of fun to be around.

Slowing down directly counters this, helping us to be kinder, gentler, more easy-going, and less easily thrown off balance.

In this more balanced frame of mind, we are better placed to contribute to the world's peace rather than add to its aggression.

Unpleasant Moments Will Seem to Pass By Faster

One of the functions handled by the left hemisphere of the brain is the conscious awareness of the passing of time. Conversely, the right hemisphere is not time aware.

Meditation has been found to preferentially activate the right side of the brain. Therefore, to the extent that slowing down fosters a meditative state, time passes faster.

This is one possible explanation behind the saying, "Time flies when you're having fun". Having fun promotes a focus on the present moment leading to a relaxed, meditative state. With the right side of the brain activated, we temporarily lose the ability to judge the passage of time - four hours of fun seem to pass by in minutes.

Back to our cooking example. By trying to rush through it you inadvertently activate the left side of your brain and so become ultra-sensitive to the passage of time - preparing supper seems to take an eternity.

On the other hand, if you slow down and just focus on the task at hand (thus fostering a calm, meditative state) the right hemisphere of your brain will be activated - supper preparation will seem to take less time than it actually did.

You'll See Reality More Clearly

As discussed in Chapter 29 ("*Stress – Its Science & Management*"), the ancient part of our brain, the amygdala, functions wonderfully to keep us safe from potential danger by triggering our stress response, preparing us to fight or flee in a matter of milliseconds.

However, the tradeoff for this quickness is inaccuracy - think policeman mistaking a submarine sandwich for a gun (yes, this has actually happened, with deadly consequences).

Slowing down provides two major benefits:

1. We see reality with greater clarity and so can respond more appropriately.
2. By calming our mind, we turn off our reactionary amygdala and switch on our wiser prefrontal cortex. As a result, creative solutions to life's challenges come more readily to mind. In addition, we're less impulsive and better able to avoid getting caught up in pointless drama.

Kinetic Energy = Mass x Velocity Squared

In North America at least, society has decided that the maximum speed limits posted on our highways and byways are to be taken as the *minimum* speeds everyone is expected to do.

But, as Sir Isaac Newton's classical equations show us, going faster has serious implications; in short, [speed kills](#).

Take an average passenger car weighing 4000 pounds. If it's involved in a collision with another vehicle, how much more destructive force comes into play at 120 kph versus 100 kph (i.e. a 20% increase in speed)?

- 4000 lbs x 100 kph x 100 kph = 40 million
- 4000 lbs x 120 kph x 120 kph = 57.6 million

In other words, a 20% increase in speed results in a 44% increase in destructive energy. Push this to 130 kph and the extra force involved is almost 70% greater.

To no surprise, the risk of death increases exponentially with an increase in speed, and this despite what appear to be relatively modest differences in vehicle velocity.

When it comes to driving, slowing down really does mean slowing down, for reasons too obvious to state.

Eating Will Be More Than Simply Fueling Up

Eating our meals slowly delivers a number of benefits:

1. Eating is one of the great joys of life, one that is enhanced materially if we slow down enough to savor the flavor (along with temperature, texture, aroma, and other enjoyable sensations).
2. For those of us with weight issues, eating more slowly may also help with weight loss. How so? Well, it's been found that it takes the body about twenty minutes to register being full. So, if you wolf your meal down in ten minutes, there's a good chance you'll end up eating beyond the point of fullness because you've not given your body sufficient time to let you know that it's had enough.

3. Meals are more than food intake, they're very often social events as well. Slowing down creates more time to enjoy the social aspect of eating.
4. Slowing down leads to chewing longer which, by reducing the size of food chunks that must be dealt with by the stomach, helps ward off indigestion. Slowing down also leads to reduced air intake into the digestive tract, which not only minimizes the chance of indigestion but heartburn as well.
5. Eating slowly increases nutrient intake: more nutrition without more calories.

You'll Make Fewer Errors

There's a reason someone came up with the saying, "*Haste makes waste*". Enough said!

Your Life Smooths Out

As mentioned above, rushing turns most everything into an obstacle, one more frustrating impediment thwarting our efforts to finish what we're doing so we can get on to our next task.

But when you slow down and choose instead to move at the speed of life, letting it unfold in its own time with patience and acceptance, things magically smooth out and life ceases to feel like a struggle.

Choosing Slow Means Choosing a Life Philosophy

Choosing to live life in the slow lane is to consciously adopt a guiding set of principles, a clear philosophy by which you intend to live your life.

The goal behind slowing down is to lead a peaceful life, a goal I personally believe to be of the highest order.

In the absence of a guiding philosophy, we necessarily succumb to our default settings - primitive instincts and the mindless adoption of cultural norms, neither of which necessarily serve our best interests except through happenstance.

If living a peaceful life strikes you as a reasonable philosophy, one that is preferable to the rat race most of us currently endure, then it's time to take charge and make the change.

Welcome to life in the slow lane!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 15: JUST OBSERVE

"The ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence."

Jiddu Krishnamurti, Indian philosopher (1895 - 1986)

Observing Our Senses

Life as we know it comes into existence only because our five senses make us aware of "what's out there".

Then it's up to us. How we choose to relate to these sensory inputs dictates whether we manifest heaven, or manifest hell.

To be mindful is to observe what our senses are telling us *without adding a layer of judgmental commentary* - "that's too cold, too salty, too loud, I don't like that,"

For example, the sound of a lawn mower is inherently neither good nor bad; it's simply sound waves reaching our ear which are then processed by our brain to let us know there is "something out there" that we should perhaps take note of in case it's important to our survival.

Dealing with sensory inputs in this unembellished, non-judgmental manner - simply observing them much like a scientist observes an interesting specimen - ***provides us with psychic calm and homeostasis.***

"Peace is this moment without judgment, this moment in the heart-space where everything that is, is welcome."

Dorothy Hunt, poet and founder of the San Francisco Centre for Meditation and Psychotherapy

But we don't observe life in this manner, do we.

Instead, we create a running commentary - "That lawn mower of John's is so noisy I can't hear myself think!!!! And the smell of the fumes is awful!"

The result? Stress and upset, and all of it entirely self-induced and self-inflicted by our own thoughts; stuff we just make up in our own little heads. After all, what one person finds annoying another may find amusing - only the thought differs.

"The difference between a flower and a weed is a judgment."

Barry Neil Kaufman, Co-founder of the 'Option Institute'

Yes, the sound of John's lawnmower may indeed be making it difficult for you to concentrate. And yes, few would consider lawn mower exhaust fumes to be enjoyable. But we all know that this is exactly what lawnmowers do - that's just reality.

Applying judgmental commentary to reality accomplishes nothing - it's just us trying to wish it away, to put up resistance to it.

But what have we learned about resisting reality? That's right; it only leads to needless suffering.

So, the point here is that if we succumb to our tendency to be judgmental commentators on everything we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste then agitation will follow us everywhere.

If, on the other hand, *we simply observe life - observe reality - through our senses, eschewing colour commentary*, then peace, grace, and ease of being will be our constant companions.

This is the lesson of *acceptance* and non-resistance to life, letting it unfold in its own manner and in its own time without judging each moment as good, bad, or indifferent.

In the absence of resistance, life smooths out and ceases feeling like a struggle.

As mentioned in other posts, this doesn't mean passive victimization. If something can be done to change or withdraw from a truly intolerable situation (assuming this is the best way forward), then by all means attempt to do so. But if neither change nor withdrawal is possible or prudent, then acceptance is the only sane option.

Observing Our Thoughts, Feelings, Moods, and Emotions

In this same manner, we can also become **observers** of our *thoughts, feelings, moods, and emotions*.

Why would we wish to do this? Two reasons come to mind:

1. If we don't keep our thoughts at arm's length - if we don't put a bit of distance between our conscious awareness and our thoughts - we tend to get all caught up in them. We identify with our thoughts, become one with them, take them seriously, and then make a big deal out of them. *And whenever we do this, we inevitably react to life in unhelpful ways.*
2. Putting that little bit of distance between ourselves and our thoughts provides us with the luxury of choice - to choose the wisest way forward rather than reacting unthinkingly.

For example, if we're feeling angry, we invariably react with anger. But we all know that anger just elicits more anger. Is this *ever* the wisest way forward?

"Understanding how our emotions have the power to run us around in circles helps us discover how we increase our pain."

Pema Chodron, Buddhist nun and author of "[Comfortable With Uncertainty](#)"

"Understand that, in the end, the most powerful anger attack is no more than a thought."

Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and author of "[Why Meditate?](#)"

Why Do We Even Have Feelings?

Given the fact that feelings exacerbate all our perceived troubles, why do we even have them? After all, bacteria seem to thrive just fine without thoughts, emotions, and feelings.

Well, that's a fair question. Since emotions come so naturally to us, we never bother to question why we even have them in the first place. Why *do* we feel things like joy, anger, love, disgust, fear, and jealousy?

Put simply, *feelings are evolution's way of nudging us to take advantage of opportunities and avoid loss.*

But evolution only functions through one principle - enhancing the odds of passing genes to the next generation - *our contentment and happiness do not come into play.*

"I had thought that selection shaped us to be healthy, happy, nice, cooperative members of a community. Alas, no. Natural selection does not give a fig about our happiness. In the calculus of evolution, only reproductive success matters."

Randolph Nesse, Professor of Psychiatry and author of "[Good Reasons for Bad Feelings](#)"

What this means is that *our feelings aren't always acting in our best interest.*

Therefore, if we want to lead happy, peaceful lives, it is incumbent on us to take charge and assume full responsibility for how we act *in the face of our feelings, emotions, and moods.*

Changing the Calculus of Evolution

Knowing the evolutionary basis behind our feelings and its lack of interest in our peace of mind and mental well-being, *with mindfulness practice we can develop the ability to simply observe them non-judgmentally.*

For example, let's say you get a terrible night's sleep. If you're like me, you wake up the next morning feeling pretty grouchy!

In such circumstances, a *mindless* individual, in thrall to their emotions, fully identifies with their grouchiness - they *become* grouchiness. Trivial issues feel like major irritants and loved ones are lashed out at for the slightest of perceived infractions.

By way of contrast, a *mindful* individual, practiced in being consciously aware of how they're feeling moment to moment, simply observes the fact that they're feeling grouchy - no big deal, it happens to everyone, just part of being human - and they know better than to identify with it or act on it.

So, rather than giving in to their mood, they choose instead to go easy on themselves, and others.

"Because of mindfulness, we see things when they arise. Because of our understanding, we don't buy into the chain reaction that makes things grow from minute to expansive - we leave things minute."

Pema Chodron

Moods Don't Last

In addition to appreciating the evolutionary basis behind emotions, it's also helpful to remind ourselves that *moods are transitory*, nothing more than unwanted house guests who will be gone come morning.

It's why the saying, "Time heals all" is a truism - feelings change. The fact of impermanence holds for everything; nothing lasts forever, including thoughts, feelings, emotions, and moods. Don't latch on to them and they will dissipate all on their own: what was anger-inducing at 9am will be but a mildly-annoying memory by 3pm and completely out of mind by tomorrow.

Becoming the Observer of Our Feelings

To become the observer of our feelings (rather than letting ourselves become their unwitting victim), the following steps are suggested:

1. **Meditate daily** because *this teaches us to notice, in this instance to notice how we're feeling moment-to-moment*. Through meditation practice we sensitize ourselves to the first signs of emotional distress, giving us a fighting chance to respond differently, to respond better, than we have in the past.
2. **Slow down your mind's whirlwind of thoughts** at the first signs of agitation because this shuts down the reactive part of your brain (the amygdala) and activates the wisely-responsive part (the prefrontal cortex).
3. **Pause before acting** because this saves us from saying and doing really stupid things!

By following these steps, we separate stimulus (i.e. the emotion) from action, *giving ourselves just that little extra bit of time to ease up and engage with life in a more intelligent manner*.

If we don't practice these steps - noticing, slowing down our thinking, and pausing before acting - we fall instead into evolutionary-default-mode.

In this mode we react instinctively, habitually, and unthinkingly. And if this combination doesn't sound like the path of wisdom, you'd be right!

"It all comes through learning to pause for just a moment and *not* doing the same thing again and again out of impulse. Simply to pause, instead of immediately filling up the space, transforms us."

Pema Chodron

"We so often create very complicated lives for ourselves, getting lost again and again in the drama of our stories and emotions. And yet, when we investigate our experiences in the moment more carefully, we see that it's really only six things that ever happen: sights and sounds, smells and tastes, sensations in the body, and objects of mind."

So, when things seem too stressful, remember the possibility of renouncing the habit of proliferating thoughts, particularly the "I-me-mine" story, and come back to the simple experience of the moment."

Joseph Goldstein, "[Mindfulness - A Practical Guide to Awakening](#)"

Slowing Down the Mind

So, how do we slow down our mind when it's whirling with emotion? How do we catch ourselves in time before we do or say something we later regret?

Well, one simple means is by practicing PBS: *Pause, Breathe, Smile*.

- **Pause** - at the first sign of emotional turmoil, stop whatever you're doing and turn your attention inward, to the feelings in your body, in particular *scanning for areas of muscle tightness, and softening them*.

Here I imagine my muscles to be like wax melting ever so slowly under a gentle heat. Turning your focus inward in this manner re-directs your attention away from what's troubling you, kills the stress reaction, and puts a halt to any whiny thinking.

- **Breathe** - breathe slowly and deeply two to three times (in to the count of four, hold for seven, and exhale to the count of eight, with eyes closed if feasible), while continuing to soften any areas of tightness. This activates your calming parasympathetic nervous system, shutting down the stress reaction.
- **Smile** - smiling, even if forced, stimulates the release of helpful hormones (i.e. *serotonin* - calming, *dopamine* - pleasure, and *endorphins* - natural pain killer) and banishes the life-sucking seriousness that accompanies emotional upset. The simple act of smiling helps you regain perspective.

With regular mindfulness practice we can train ourselves to disidentify with how we're feeling and, instead, simply observe our emotions, moods, and feelings with kindness and compassion.

Mentally, we may even call them out, "*Ah, hello anxiety. I see you.*" Bringing them into conscious awareness in this manner slows down our thinking, stops our mind from spinning out of control, and helps us deal with troubling thoughts wisely rather than be subsumed by them.

In the resulting calmer state of mind, our actions are inevitably wiser because we're able to tap into the higher-order executive functioning of our brain's prefrontal cortex rather than its lower-order reactive amygdala.

"Thus, by becoming more and more familiar with the mechanisms of the mind and by cultivating mindfulness, you will reach the point where you no longer let sparks of nascent emotions turn into forest fires that can destroy your own happiness and that of others."

Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and author of "[Why Meditate?](#)"

Attaining Psychological Freedom

Daily mindfulness meditation practice trains us to be *non-judgmental observers* of our senses, thoughts, feelings, emotions, and moods - simply letting them be and noting them with kindness and compassion.

In this manner, we free ourselves from the self-inflicted mental anguish we otherwise bring upon ourselves.

"You are the sky. The clouds are what happens, what comes and goes."

Eckhart Tolle, author of "[The Power of Now](#)"

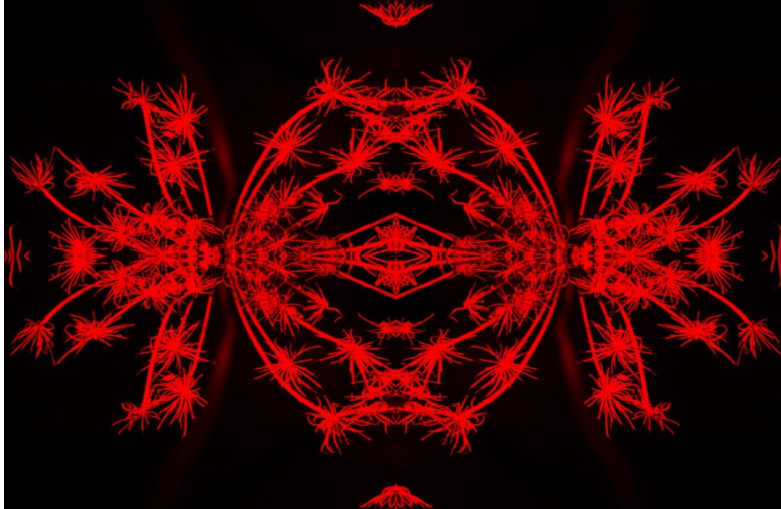
Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

"I am not the endless chatter in my head. I am the me who recognizes that chatter is happening. I am not the me who is impatient in the grocery line or at the stoplight. I am the me who recognizes and acknowledges that impatience.

If I take a breath and change the chatter to "*This is me waiting calmly*", that is what the experience becomes. Practising this simple awareness allows me to be present in all moments, to fully inhabit my life."

Richard Wagamese, Canadian First Nations author and journalist (1955-2017) from his book, "[Embers - One Ojibway's Meditations](#)"



Chapter 16: SELFLESSNESS – A WISER PATH THROUGH LIFE

When you think of the word "Me" or "I" what comes to mind?

Are you your body?

No, that can't be it, because your body is subject to constant change; there is no permanent "You" there. You can't be something that changes from moment to moment because tomorrow's "You" isn't today's "You".

Sure, there's a strong resemblance from one day to the next based on our weak powers of perception, but take a peek at your Grade 3 class photo and it's quickly obvious that there's no permanent "You" to be found in your body.

Well, what about your personality, opinions, and beliefs, the things you stand for that help define you as a person?

Like your body, there is certainly a sameness from moment to moment but, ultimately, these too are subject to change over time. In my own case I'm more outgoing than I used to be, less judgmental, and more understanding.

The same holds true for our situation in life - employed, retired, healthy, ill - nothing here either but constant flux.

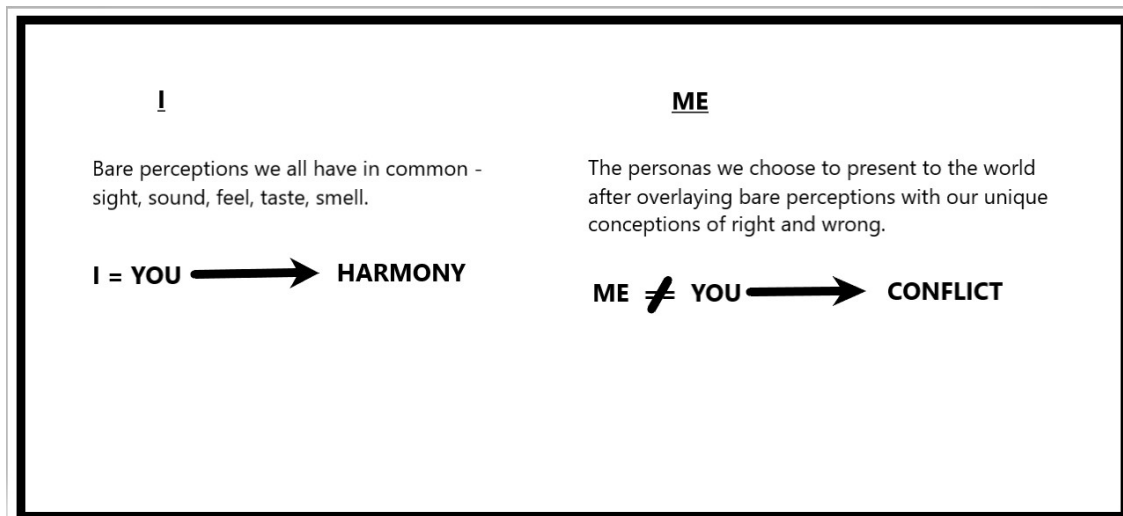
In fact, when you try to pin down exactly what constitutes "You", it's all just stuff subject to change - there is no distinct thing that is a definitive, unchanging "You".

In truth, what we typically think of as "Me" is really just a social construct, a useful piece of shorthand to facilitate communication, sort of like a house address to make sure the mail gets to the right recipient.

Why This Matters

I know this all sounds rather esoteric, but at its heart lies a key mindfulness teaching, one that can make the difference between a life filled with peace and love and one filled with anxiety and drama.

The truth of the matter is that when we fail to see who we really are (we're coming to this shortly) and, instead, identify with our egos (i.e. our made-up image of ourselves) we get ourselves into a heap of trouble.



As soon as we create and identify with a "Me" we automatically create an "Other", someone who is *not us*.

Given our innate tendency to favor ourselves (and those close to us) over others and to ruthlessly protect our self-image and reputation, needless conflict follows. For proof of this, just check out the headlines from any newspaper to confirm just how awful we can treat each other when mindless egos do battle.

"According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief. It produces harmful thoughts of "me" and "mine", selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, and egoism. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world."

Walpola Rahula, author of ["What the Buddha Taught"](#)

The Delusion of Self

The current coronavirus pandemic makes it pointedly clear just how delusional our ego-centric approach to life is.

We're not a separate "Me" and a separate "You" and a separate "Them" - we're all in this thing called life together - interdependent and interconnected.

Indeed, all living and inanimate things are better thought of as but fleeting cosmic phenomena momentarily coming together in the vastness of time and space and then moving on again, taking up new roles in the ceaseless unfolding of the universe. Einstein put it this way:

"A human being is a part of the whole called by us "universe", a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Here's how I picture things. Think of these clouds as the unfolding universe, hundreds of billions of light-years across in every direction and some fourteen billion years old.



You and I? We're just a tiny collection of atoms within this cosmic vastness; fleeting, ever-changing agglomerations that have come together in time and space for but a brief moment, soon to disperse, and all the time just part and parcel of the great, magnificent whole.

In other words, we're not IN the universe, we're OF it. This is why it's delusional to think of ourselves as separate beings - we're all just part of a great unfolding mystery.

"Those swirls of cream mixing into the coffee? That's us. Ephemeral patterns of complexity riding a wave of increasing entropy from simple beginnings to simple end. We should enjoy the ride."

Dr. Sean Carroll, "The Big Picture"

So, Who are "You"?

The following observations point us toward the answer:

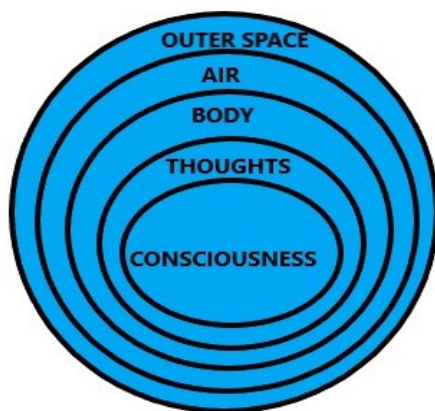
- *Anything that you can observe cannot be "You". Why? Because it's the "You" who's doing the observing.*
- *Anything that can be observed is subject to change. Anything subject to change can't be "You" because with each passing moment there would be a different "You". Which one is the real "You"? None of them.*
- *The only thing not subject to change is that which does the observing - the true "You".*

What is it that we can observe? Through our five senses of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling we observe the external world, including our own bodies.

What about our thoughts, feelings, and emotions? Yes, these too can be observed ("I sense that I'm feeling angry"). In this regard, our brain serves as a sixth sense, tasked with monitoring our inner weather patterns - anxious, joyful, angry, sad, envious.

So, who is the "You" doing all this observing?

The answer? **Your conscious awareness.**



Everything outside of consciousness is observable and subject to change and so can't be "You". This leaves only one conclusion:

***At your essence, you are simply pure consciousness, pure awareness,
the one who observes.***

You - the Observer

At our most basic we can think of ourselves simply as observers of stimuli.

Our bodies are equipped with a myriad of sensors (for sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, and the brain, tasked with monitoring our thoughts, feelings, and emotions).

These sensors monitor stimuli from the outside world, as well as our inner world, and send the information to our conscious awareness.

The real "You", the observer, the one consciously aware of this information, then gets to decide what, if anything, to do about it.

But this brings up an important caveat - *stimuli, by their very nature, are neither good nor bad, they simply are what they are* - in other words, reality.

Living in conscious awareness means accepting this truth. Conscious awareness doesn't embellish the information received from the senses - no judgments about whether it's good or bad, no opinions. Instead, it simply accepts it as is and then, with equanimity, deals with it - no drama, no muss, no fuss - simply a well-considered response given whatever life situation presents itself.

And what is meant by "well-considered"? ***Whatever response lends itself to bringing peace into the world rather than adding to its aggression.***

"Getting behind our conscious thoughts and feelings can allow us to steer a more intelligent course through our lives."

Sam Harris, author of "[Waking Up - A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion](#)"

"The part of our mind that is aware of anger is just simply aware - it is not angry. In other words, awareness is not affected by the emotion it is observing. When we understand that, we can step back, realize this emotion has no solidity, and allow enough space for it to dissolve by itself."

Matthieu Ricard, author of "[Why Meditate?](#)"

"One of the most life-changing realizations you can have is, "I don't have to believe my thoughts...they are just thoughts!" Any story you have about yourself is not the same as the unfolding reality of what you are: the ongoing life of your senses, the tenderness of your heart, the consciousness that right now is seeing or hearing these words. Yet because our beliefs are continuously filtering and interpreting reality, we mistake our stories about ourselves and the world for reality itself."

Tara Brach, author of "[Radical Compassion](#)"

How We Mess This All Up

To our detriment however, we don't live our lives as impartial observers. Why? *Because we're unconscious most of the time.*

What do I mean by unconscious? Three things:

1. We identify with our ego.
2. We don't live in the present moment but, rather, are often fixated on the future.
3. We lack awareness of our animal instincts.

Identification With Ego

As mentioned above, we tend to think of ourselves as being separate and apart from everyone and everything. While understandable, this is nonetheless an illusion, one that results in needless grief.

And even if you don't buy that it is an illusion, failing to counter such a view leads to grief regardless, so still best to ditch the ego and live instead in pure conscious awareness.

"In a controversy, the instant we feel anger we have already ceased striving for the truth, and have begun striving for ourselves."

Thomas Carlyle, British historian, writer, and philosopher (1795 – 1881)

"Bringing people together is what I call "ubuntu", which means "I am, because you are". Far too often we think of ourselves as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out, it is for the whole of humanity."

The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, South African Anglican Bishop (1931 – 2021)

Future Focus

To our detriment, our minds are often fixated on the future rather than remaining firmly in the present moment, the only moment we ever get to actually experience life. For example:

- When driving somewhere we fixate on arriving at our destination and so fail to pay attention to each present moment. One need only observe people's driving these days to get a sense of what I'm talking about - speeding to get to their destination, their mind firmly fixed on the future, and their present moment doesn't even register - *they're unconscious*. And the downside? Rushing causes stress which poisons the body and blocks access to intelligence and self-control. Increasing episodes of road rage are but one evident consequence.
- When working on a task we fixate on the end-point, its completion, rather than giving our full attention to the moment-by-moment actions required to do it. For many, meal preparation is a prime example of a task we don't enjoy. Consequently, we try to rush through it, our focus solely on the future - when we get to eat. In this manner, we ensure that cooking is indeed an onerous task and make ourselves temporarily and needlessly miserable - *we're unconscious*. Why do I say *needlessly* miserable? Because studies find that tasks done with attention to process rather than on the finish line render even odious tasks bearable, and often even interesting.

Animal Instincts

We are unconscious to our evolutionary inheritance. Without this awareness, getting through life is akin to being controlled by an utterly mindless and predictable computer algorithm: "If this happens, then I react in this manner."

But the computer code that controls us was written by evolution billions of years ago and so is ridiculously outdated. As a result, it produces mindless and utterly predictable behaviour:

- "If John insults me then I get angry and shout at him"
- "If my boss gives me too much work to do then I get stressed, frustrated, depressed, and angry"
- "If I don't get my way then I pout and sulk and think disparaging thoughts about whoever or whatever is thwarting my wishes"

Living in such a manner is analogous to being a sentient puppet unaware you have access to scissors. Worse, you don't even realize that strings control your life.

This "if-then" type of existence is what I refer to as living in [evolutionary default mode](#). It is an unthinking, habitual, reactive, unintelligent way of getting through life evidenced by selfishness, frustration, impatience, intolerance, low-level chronic anxiety and discontent.

A Wiser Path Through Life

What does it take to snap out of this ego-centric, "if-then", unconscious way of living?

- First, we need to realize fully that our egos are not who we really are and that we're not separate and apart from the rest of humanity nor of the universe. In reality, we're all just part of the natural unfolding of the universe. Perceiving life in terms of "Me" and "Mine" runs exactly counter to tracing a wise path through life.

"True love is when you can look upon another being and, in them, see yourself."

Anonymous

"We have flown the air like birds and swum the sea like fishes, but have yet to learn the simple act of walking the earth like brothers."

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 - 1968)

"The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes. Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. This helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter. It is the ultimate source of success in life."

Dalai Lama XIV

"When you are present, you can sense the spirit - the one consciousness in every creature - and love it as yourself."

Eckhart Tolle, author of "[A New Earth](#)"

- Second, we absolutely, positively need to remind ourselves, over and over, that we are simply members of the animal kingdom. As such, like all animals, we are subject to instinctual control by that evolutionary algorithm. *Remembering this moment to moment is essential to waking up and resisting these instinctual tendencies.* In the absence of such realization, you *are* that sentient puppet.

In terms of neurobiology, what this entails is training yourself to preferentially activate your wise frontal cortex instead of your reactive amygdala. *Meditation practice is essential in this regard, particularly loving-kindness meditation to strengthen compassion.*

It also helps immensely to ditch your ego and, instead, learn to laugh at yourself each time you get all riled up over one of life's trivialities (and they're *all* trivialities). With each occurrence, feel free to say to yourself, "**There you go again, caveman!**" (or cave-woman as the case may be!)

- Lastly, we need to realize that life can be lived so much more wisely through the adoption of **simple conscious awareness**: *observe all that arises with equanimity and then respond appropriately, in a considered manner*. Doing so eliminates so much needless drama.

"Our practice is simply to settle back and note in each moment what is arising, without judgment, without evaluation, without interpretation. It is simple, bare attention to what is happening."

Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, authors of "[Seeking the Heart of Wisdom](#)"

Realizing Our True Nature

Living in spare conscious awareness we live life simply, meaning directly through our senses - reality untainted by our self-centered ego.

And guess what? *This is what mindfulness is all about!*

Present-moment conscious awareness of the raw stimuli sent from our six senses, unembellished by ego-centric judgment, commentary, or opinion, and then choosing a well-considered response.

Ease of Being

Free of programmed puppet-like behaviour, we naturally begin to ease up, slow down, settle in, and accept with equanimity whatever life presents - good or bad.

We get comfortable in our own skin and drop the armor we carry to protect our egos.

We learn to cut ourselves, and others, considerable slack, acknowledging the often-stupid behaviour we all exhibit from time to time driven by our built-in tendencies.

And, with the resulting ease of being, we start noticing life again, just like when we were kids bursting with curiosity, enjoying it in all its aspects, especially its minute points of joy.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

P.S. At the end of this essay you will find a meditation I created specifically to help dis-identify with ego and mentally shift to 'non-self'.

"Scientists tell us of the constant changes in subatomic particles, but since these are not visible to our ordinary perceptions we assume that the world around us is immutable and fixed.

In fact, our body, feelings, and so on are dynamic processes in which every aspect of them is arising and passing away in each moment. Nothing is static, even though it may appear to be firm and unchanging because our perception is not sharp enough to detect the subtle changes occurring in each moment.

The obscured mind puts together these unique moments of ever-changing existence and sees them as solid objects so that the ignorant mind can deal with the world. A stable, solid body is a mental image superimposed onto a stream of events in the same way that a spinning propeller is seen as a circle."

The Dalai Lama & the Venerable Thubten Chodron, [Tricycle magazine](#)

"However, as I pointed out before, if you choose to focus on the particle level, then you cannot draw neat boundary lines separating an entity such as a cell or a hog from the rest of the world in which it resides. Notions like "cell" or "hog" aren't relevant at that far lower level.

... electrons, photons, neutrinos, and so forth zip across such artificial boundaries without the least compunction."

Dr. Douglas Hofstadter, physicist and author of "[I am a Strange Loop](#)"

The Disappearing “You”

By: Rob Rienzo

In your mind’s eye, see yourself sitting here now meditating. See your body as a separate entity, apart from its surroundings – the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

Now, move inward, seeing from the perspective of your heart. What do you see? Maybe your lungs slowly expanding and diminishing, or perhaps your rib cage expanding and contracting as you breathe.

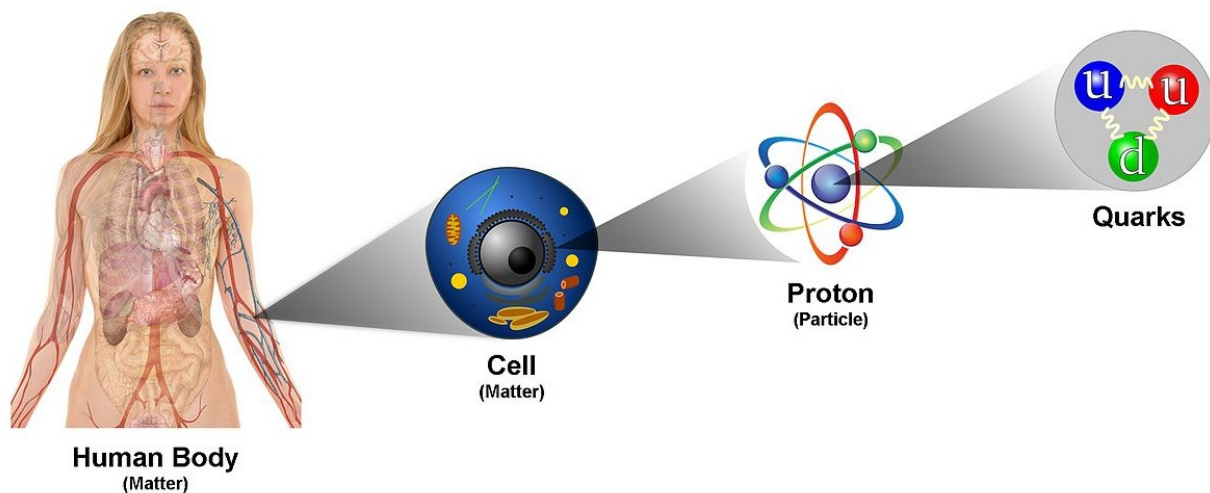
Continue to move inwards, now from the perspective of an individual heart cell. What do you see? Millions upon millions of identical cells just like you, stretching out endlessly in every direction, all gently undulating to the heart’s persistent beat, like waves on a vast ocean.

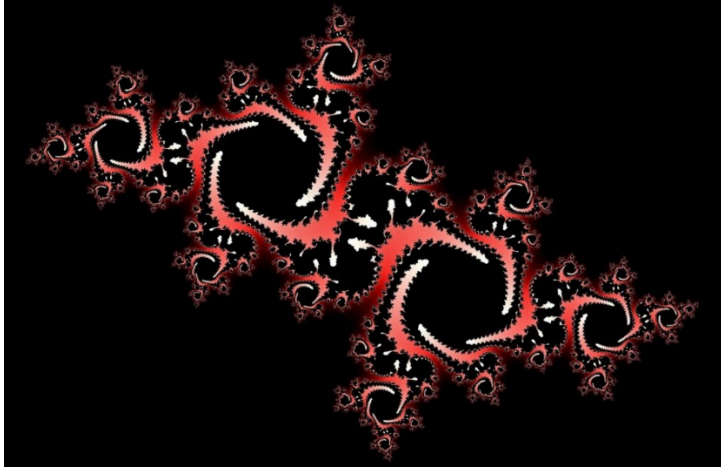
Continuing our journey inward we take on the perspective of a single atom from one of those cells. Picture the world from this vantage point. See the borderless haze of electrons buzzing around you, ephemeral and cloudlike.

And now, move even further inward, entering the world of sub-atomic particles and pure energy – quarks, photons, neutrinos, gamma rays – the essence of the universe itself. **See the dancing patterns on your eyelids as this world** – black voids amid ever-shifting clouds of particles and energy.

Here there is no “You”. Here there is no boundary between “self” and “not-self”. Here there is only an effervescence, particles zipping here and there amid pulsing waves of energy. “You” no longer exist.

Rest here. Rest here in “no self”. Rest here in silence; in pure presence; in peace.

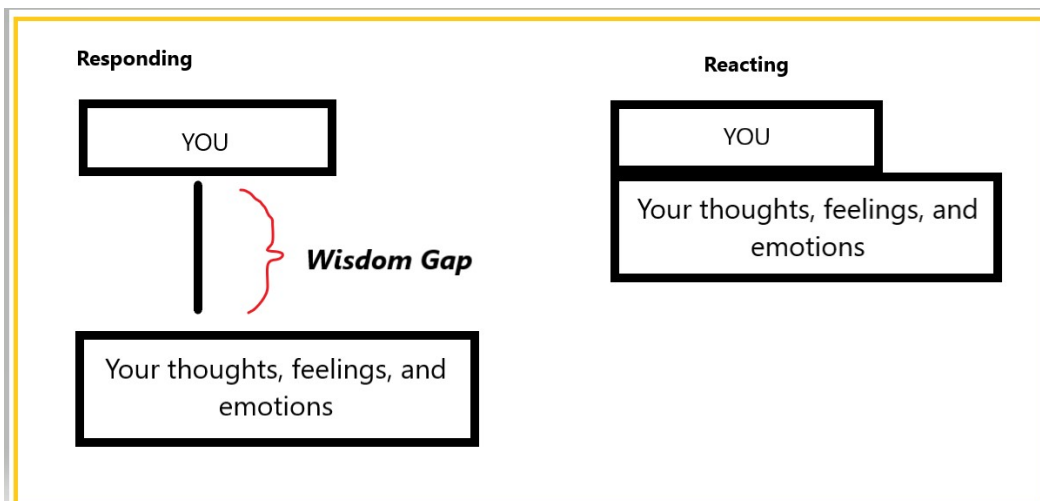




Chapter 17: THE WISDOM GAP

Learning to Respond to Life Rather than Reacting to It

As depicted below, the Wisdom Gap refers to the *learned* ability to distance yourself from your thoughts, feelings, and emotions.



Reacting

Here's an example of reacting to life. You're driving home on a stretch of road under repair by the City when you encounter some very sharp rocks that instantly puncture both front tires.

After the initial shock wears off and you've steered your car to safety, your emotions swell - anger at the City for not taking better care of the road; anxiety over who to call and what to do next; worry over the extent of the damage and cost of the repair bill; and dread thinking about how much of your time this is all going to consume, to say nothing of the many frustrations expected along the way.

In short, you're angry, frustrated, anxious, and feeling overwhelmed. Upsetting thoughts swirl, seemingly of their own accord, with you as their helpless victim. What had been a peaceful mindset just moments before has been transformed into a right awful mood. **Your day is ruined.**

Tragically, this is how most of us interact with the world when things don't go our way - we immediately identify with our thoughts.

Indeed, we don't even realize we're thinking. Instead, we unquestioningly take our thoughts as simply reflecting reality.

Sadly, what we fail to realize is this; that in the absence of our thinking, everything in life is, in fact, totally neutral – *it simply is what it is*. **Our ruined day is just us thinking ourselves into a snit.**

Minus this realization, we *become* our thoughts. If angered we *become* anger. If anxious we *become* anxiety. We lose perspective, we lack intelligence, and our wisdom goes missing in action. And let's not even think about the awful health ramifications of exposing ourselves to chronic stress.

In short, absolutely nothing good flows from this way of dealing with life. Fortunately, there is an alternative - we can choose to *respond* rather than *react*.

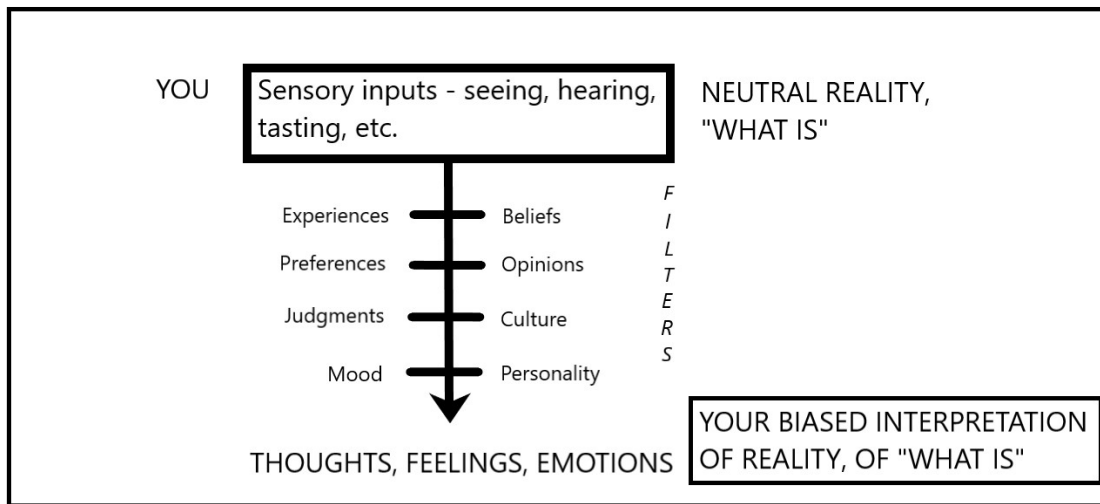
Responding

Learning to respond to life means realizing fully that *we are not our thoughts, feelings, and emotions*. In other words, *with practice*, we can readily develop the ability to feel angry without acting out in anger. We can feel anxious without becoming overwhelmed with anxiety. We can feel jealousy and envy and regret and the full host of negative feelings without getting lost in them (and making bad life choices as a result).

Instead, we simply *observe ourselves* feeling a certain way: "*There's me, and there's what I'm feeling*" - **two completely distinct things.**

YOU: the raw inputs from your five senses - seeing, hearing, tasting, etc. This is reality. Of note and import is that these inputs are *totally neutral*; not good, not bad, simply 'what is'.

THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, and EMOTIONS: as depicted below, these are simply your *interpretation* of these raw sensory inputs, your personal take on 'what is', after being filtered through your unique set of accumulated life experiences, preferences, biases, judgments, opinions, concepts of what's right and wrong, beliefs, etc..



Through daily meditation practice we learn to see our true selves as separate and distinct from our thoughts, feelings, and emotions. **We learn to simply observe them rather than identify with them.**

In so doing, we take charge of our mental well-being. We see that we have the ability to *choose* how, or whether, we wish to respond to life rather than mindlessly reacting to whatever thoughts, feelings, and emotions pass through our mind.

In short, we stop taking our thoughts so seriously. We remind ourselves that what we perceive as reality is just *our* conditioned thoughts. Put a dozen people in the same exact situation and each will have their own unique perception of "reality", and what to do about it.

Further, once skilled in thought recognition, we readily acknowledge that thoughts can't hurt us or cause us emotional upset *without our permission*.

Ultimately, we realize fully that we are the sole thinker behind each and every one of our troubling thoughts and that we possess the ability to redirect our thinking in whatever direction we so choose.

Given this ability, why would we ever *choose* to dwell on troubling thoughts?

Why indeed. And so, armed with this recognition, we simply observe how we're feeling and decide what, *if anything*, to do about it, including simply letting such thoughts pass through our mind like so many scudding clouds on a windy day. In short, we see them for what they are - simply thoughts, possessing no power over us.

In physical terms, what creating a Wisdom Gap does is turn down the volume of our reactive amygdala and permit the emotional intelligence of our responsively-wise prefrontal cortex to come to the fore.

Evolutionary Reminder

As I've mentioned in other posts, it's always important to keep in mind that feelings and emotions are just evolution's way of nudging us to behave in ways that enhance the odds of passing on our genetic material.

But as we know, evolution cares not one jot about our happiness - that's up to us to achieve through wise life choices. And, by definition, wise life choices require wisdom, and this means ready access to the Wisdom Gap, the recognition that provides us access to clear, responsive thinking.

Case Study: Responding Rather Than Reacting to Those Blown Tires

Armed with knowledge of the Wisdom Gap, instead of giving in to feelings of overwhelm we:

- **Know to make use of any number of [mindfulness techniques](#)** to calm our jangled nerves such as PBS (Pause, Breathe, and Smile). All such techniques serve to relax our body, slow down our anxious thinking, help us regain perspective, and provide renewed access to our innate wisdom.
- **We laugh at our predicament**, one we recognize as simply being part of life, no big deal, and nothing that untold others haven't also experienced - and lived to tell the tale.
- **We reflect on the truth that clinging to our likes** (here, functioning tires) **or trying to push away our dislikes** (here, flat tires, being stranded, etc.) **leads only to needless psychological suffering**. Better to simply accept the reality of each situation that life presents and deal with it, minus any drama which adds nothing to the solution and just makes us feel worse. We take to heart that there are no "problems", simply situations to deal with. Indeed, "problems" are just things we make up in our own heads. In the absence of labeling a situation as 'bad', it just remains a situation, nothing more – simply a reality to be dealt with.
- **We feel gratitude** that we weren't hurt. And after all, it's only a car, and a car can be fixed.
- **We maintain perspective**, in this case that others around the world are experiencing far greater challenges than this. Indeed, by comparison, this is simply too trivial to fuss over.

- **We remember that our perception of life is driven totally by our own thinking** and that we're in control of that thinking, *our thinking isn't in control of us*. In other words, negative feelings are simply the result of negative, dysfunctional thoughts. Knowing this, we just permit them to pass on by. By not locking on to them, better thoughts, wiser thoughts, can (and will) take their place. In this healthier state of mind, solutions come more readily to mind. And then we simply implement them, minus any needless angst and inner turmoil.
- **We remind ourselves to view life's challenges not as problems but as wonderful teaching moments to practice mindfulness.** After all, it's when the going gets tough that we're most thankful for our daily mindfulness practice. It's this practice that permits us to maintain healthy mental functioning in the face of challenging circumstances.

Indeed, *in the absence of such practice there is a near zero chance of ever responding wisely*. Why? Because reacting to life habitually and unthinkingly is what most of us practice to death *daily*. We unwittingly mold ourselves into **masters** of reacting! In physical terms, what we are doing is strengthening the neuronal pathways leading to mindless reaction while leaving dormant those pathways that would otherwise provide access to responsive wisdom.

- **We notice when our thinking drifts anxiously off to an unchangeable past** ("*if only I'd taken that other route I was considering!!! How stupid of me!*") **or an unknowable made-up future** ("*Dealing with the City over damages is going to be SO frustrating!!!!*"). In that moment of noticing our loss of presence, we simply let go of such thoughts and return our attention to the present, the only moment that actually exists. Mindfulness, after all, is totally about living in the present moment.

Healthy Mental Functioning IS Possible

Now I know that many reading this post will view its message as fantastical thinking, positing a degree of thought-recognition and self-control both unattainable and unrealistic; perhaps even a tad odd.

After all, I certainly would have thought so in my pre-mindfulness days. Back then, I saw all thoughts as *real* and needing to be reacted to.

And as for self-control being perceived as odd, on more than one occasion I have been taken to task **for failing to get upset**, something society clearly deems to be EXPECTED!

But why get upset over life's challenges if you don't have to? Surely it's better to simply deal with each situation that arises matter-of-factly, *minus the drama*, and then move on. This is the essence of the Wisdom Gap.

But Mental Health and Peace of Mind Don't Just Happen

Developing the ability to recognize that *our own thinking is always the root cause of any and all psychological suffering we experience* doesn't just happen. As with anything worthwhile in life, it takes a modicum of practice and dedication.

Case in point, people will spend hours exercising to enhance their physical health yet totally ignore the need to also attend to their mental health.

In my own personal experience, true healthy mental functioning is realized only through a dedicated meditation practice (i.e. daily) coupled with moments of quiet reflection on life's truths (i.e. daily exposure to the accumulated wisdom passed on to us by history's greatest thinkers).

This blog is dedicated to sharing some of that wisdom, and I encourage you in the strongest possible terms to read this and other mindfulness sources with the utmost regularity.

In the final analysis, please know this; that your happiness and psychological well-being lie fully in your hands and that no circumstances, no matter how dire, can keep you from their achievement.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Addendum: The Wisdom Gap Prrr Practice

For me, the title of this wisdom practice brings to mind the image of a peaceful, contented cat, perhaps apropos as we practice *responding* to life's travails rather than *reacting* to them:

Pause
relax
reflect
respond

Pause: Use the tensing of your body to an upsetting situation as a warning: "*Do not go down that path!*". Instead, *pause*; **purposely create a Wisdom Gap**, that essential bit of space between stimulus and response.

Relax: Take a few slow, deep breaths and consciously relax your muscles. Doing so preferentially activates our calming parasympathetic nervous system, shuts down our stress reaction, and permits our Executive Functioning to come to the fore (i.e. impulse control, emotional control, and creativity).

Reflect: Having put yourself into a somewhat calmer state of mind, take a further moment to reflect on the situation at hand, its trivial nature in the big scheme of things, and the benefits of responding with respect and wisdom instead of anger.

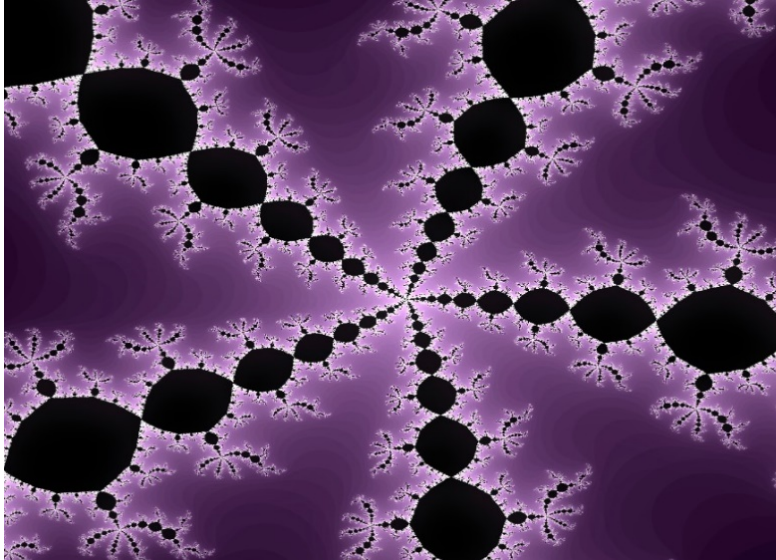
Respond: Having created a Wisdom Gap, you now possess the clarity required to respond to the situation with compassion and innate wisdom.

However, if after attempting the **Prrr** practice you still feel agitated, it's surely best to request a time out before dealing with the situation. Whatever the matter at hand may be, if it's important enough, it deserves to be dealt with properly once you (and your perceived protagonist) are both in a better frame of mind. Simply put, wisdom needs a calm mind; an agitated mind is antithetical to a positive outcome.

And lastly, if the situation at hand is ultimately not that important, then surely it's best to just *let it go*. After all, life is far too short and far too precious to waste any of it fussing over trivial matters; and most issues are, from a big-picture perspective, utterly trivial.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 18: THINKING OUR WAY TO PEACE, CONTENTMENT & HAPPINESS

“You are one thought away from happiness, one thought away from sadness. The secret lies in thought.”

Sydney Banks, ["The Missing Link"](#)

Picture yourself in this situation: You and your spouse are driving home from a social function. An embarrassing incident had occurred and the two of you are engaged in an epic argument over it.

Suddenly, as you enter an intersection, a driver running a red light slams into the passenger side of your car.

Do you keep on arguing?

Of course not. With tremendous concern you immediately check on each other's physical welfare.

So, what happened to your argument, the one that seemed so important just seconds before?

What happened to it is this: ***You both simply experienced a change of thought.***

From being furious with each other one moment to showing deep, loving concern the next, all due to nothing more than *switching the TV channel of your mind.*

But here's the thing, *it doesn't take an accident to experience a change of thought; **we have the ability to dismiss any thought at will.*** This is why happiness is always a choice; *our* choice.

"People are capable of dismissing any emotions, to the extent that they realize that emotions are thoughts."

Dr. George Pransky, "The Renaissance of Psychology"

"Once we realize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly."

Joseph Goldstein, "Mindfulness - A Practical Guide to Awakening"

The Link Between Thoughts, Feelings, and Perception

Put simply, ***our thoughts directly dictate how we feel and how we perceive the world.***

Whenever we lose sight of this fact, three problems arise:

1. ***We feel justified in feeling the way we do*** and so act on our negative feelings. We end up spewing aggression into the world, directly harming ourselves and those unfortunate enough to be around us.
2. ***We mistakenly attribute the cause of our feelings to be external factors*** - a spilled can of paint *causes us* to feel frustrated; an unkind comment *causes us* to feel angry; a long line at the grocery store *causes us* to feel agitated.
3. ***We make ourselves helpless victims of external circumstances.*** In the mistaken belief that outside factors are *causing* our agitation, we set about trying to change the world (e.g. divorcing our spouse, quitting our job, distancing ourselves from friends and family, moving to a new home or city, yelling at our children,). But because we have, at best, only tenuous control over people and situations, helpless victimhood becomes entrenched. And even when we *are* able to effect change, we soon discover that new upsets simply take their place. As a result, trying to change the world to our liking becomes a never-ending, futile quest.

"Negative emotions are simply insecure, habitual ways of reacting to life."

Dr. George Pransky

Thinking Our Way to Peace, Contentment, and Happiness

"It's our thinking, not our circumstances, that determines how we feel. We forget, moment to moment, that we are in charge of our thinking."

Richard Carlson, "You Can be Happy No Matter What"

Healthy thoughts induce positive feelings and an easy-going view of life. Even when life's inevitable challenges arise, they feel manageable and not that big a deal.

Conversely, unhealthy thoughts induce negative feelings. In such a state, the world suddenly appears harsh and life feels like a struggle.

But here's the thing - *the world hasn't changed*. The only thing that's changed is the quality of our thinking.

In truth, whenever we're feeling upset, it's us who's causing it. Through our own dysfunctional thinking we're *making* ourselves upset - *and that's all that's going on*.

And yes, it really is this simple.

Want to ditch the drama? Want to be free from anger, fear, frustration, bitterness, regret, anxiety, tension, stress, agitation, jealousy, envy, hatred,?

Of course, we all do. And here's the good news - *all it takes is in-the-moment recognition that it's just our own thinking, nothing more, that's creating our negative feelings*.

"Thought is not reality. However, our personal realities are molded via our thoughts."

Sydney Banks

"One of the most freeing insights of meditation practice is realizing that the only power thoughts have is the power we give them."

Joseph Goldstein

Choosing Healthy Thinking

So, given that what we think about is *always our choice*, why would we ever choose to indulge negative thoughts when they just create negative feelings?

Clearly, we wouldn't. We do so only because:

1. We may be completely ignorant of the link between thinking and feeling.
2. Or we may be aware of the link but still mistakenly believe that some negative feelings are normal and warranted, just a part of life that has to be endured.
3. Or we may be aware of the link but, through lack of practice, haven't yet mastered the skill to simply dismiss negative thoughts.
4. Or we may be aware of the link, practice thought dismissal regularly, but sometimes still get all caught up in our thoughts and end up behaving in an unskillful manner. Hey, no one's perfect, but at least we're striving to be so!

With practice, *at the onset of any negative feelings*, something as simple as bringing to mind the words '*faulty thinking*' is all it takes to wake us up to the fact that our thinking is temporarily dysfunctional. And, by definition, *all negative thinking is dysfunctional*.

Why is this the case? Because we always get to choose how to deal with an unpleasant situation. We can either choose the path of calm wisdom and simply deal with the situation matter-of-factly or we can choose the path of needless, pointless drama. Because drama adds nothing of benefit to any situation - indeed, only makes it worse - it necessarily follows that negative thinking is dysfunctional as otherwise why would any sane individual *choose* to worsen an already unpleasant situation?

So, once practiced in noticing the onset of negative feelings we're then positioned to dismiss the underlying negative thoughts - just let them go. Absent our attention, they're soon replaced by healthier thoughts which provide us with clarity and perspective.

"In a moment of understanding, a person actually sees the connection between his/her thought and his/her experienced reality, and having seen that connection, is able to change from within."

Dr. George Pransky

Seeing the Folly: Using Our Feelings as Signals

Just as positive physical feelings signal sound physical health, positive emotional feelings signal sound mental health. In such a state, we can trust that we're seeing the world with clarity and wisdom.

In a similar manner, just as negative physical feelings signal physical malfunction, negative emotional feelings signal mental malfunction; we are drifting into dysfunctional thinking and are being warned that we're no longer seeing the world with either clarity or wisdom.

Negative emotional feelings are simply our body's warning not to head down that path, to instead pause and slow down our thinking so we may regain proper perspective.

Regaining proper perspective is nothing more than recognizing, in real time, that *it's just us causing our own upset, and always is us*.

"When we begin to see that our experience of past and future is just a thought in the moment, a huge burden is lifted from our lives. We're not lost in our mind-created worlds."

Joseph Goldstein

So, Who Appointed You Emperor of the Dishwasher?

Here's a lighthearted example of what I've been talking about:

Those who know me will not be at all surprised to learn that I'm a touch fastidious (okay, a *lot* fastidious!) when it comes to optimally organizing a dishwasher. Plates go this way so that bowls can go that way and cutlery gets arranged for maximum exposure to the unit's cleaning jets. Just makes sense, right? Totally logical and efficient.

Unfortunately, my dear wife doesn't see the world of dishwasher-arranging quite the same way I do. In fact, pretty much the opposite. Plates, bowls, and cutlery are, to my way of thinking, totally helter-skelter. At times I swear she loads the darned machine by simply opening its door and tossing soiled dishes into it from across the room!

Needless to say, given my said fastidiousness, negative thoughts about my otherwise dear wife sometimes do cross my mind, followed, naturally, by negative feelings!

It's then that mindfulness practice saves me from myself:

- My negative feelings serve as a warning that my thinking is momentarily faulty - "*Don't go down that road!*" they tell me.
- Aware that negative feelings are caused by my own negative thinking, I immediately see my folly: "*She's not the cause of my agitation, I am!*".
- Armed with this awareness, I stop mistaking my negative thinking for reality.
- Having now returned to a better state of mind, healthier thoughts arise: "*It's only plates in a dishwasher for goodness sake!*", "*Who made you emperor of the dishwasher?!*", "*That was a lovely meal she cooked up for us tonight.*", "*I think I'll put on my headphones and stream some classical music.*", "*I wonder who won the big boxing match last night?*", and so on and so forth!

Needless to say, were I to instead indulge my negative thinking, see my wife as the *cause* of my agitation rather than recognize the true cause - *my own thinking* - the outcome would most definitely not be pretty. I would be upset, she would be upset, and all for what - 'proper' dish arrangement in a dishwasher!?!??

While this example obviously addresses a rather trivial situation (which, nonetheless, could easily escalate to being far from trivial!), *the same steps apply regardless of a situation's seriousness:*

1. Always be aware of negative feelings - *these are your early-warning signal that your thinking is momentarily dysfunctional.*
2. Recall that *negative feelings are caused by your own faulty thinking* (and *not* the situation you find yourself in).

3. Pause, breathe deeply and slowly, relax your muscles, slow your mind down, regain perspective, *and then simply dismiss your negative thoughts* - just let them go. If need be, repeat silently to yourself, '*faulty thinking*'.
4. In the moment, remember that negative thoughts aren't reality, they're just thoughts, ones that you've made up all on your own.
5. *Turn your mind to healthier thoughts.*

The Three Principles

What I've been describing is part of a psychotherapy modality known as "[The Three Principles](#)" (3P), a school of thought I personally believe holds the key to materially reducing the psychological suffering so prevalent in today's world - everything from minor agitation to genocidal hatred - all of it senseless, needless, and preventable.

Unlike most therapies that categorize certain behaviours as "illnesses", 3P instead posits that virtually everyone, no matter how outwardly troubled, possesses innate mental health temporarily obscured by the innocent misuse of thinking (i.e. failing to see the link between one's thoughts and one's feelings; incorrectly attributing negative feelings to external factors; and then acting in an unhealthy manner due to this incorrect attribution).

Based on my own personal experience, living the tenets of 3P, *I encourage everyone reading this post, in the strongest possible terms, to do themselves an enormous favor by further exploring the concepts behind 3P. **I believe them to be life-changing.***

Here, for such edification, are some eminently insightful books:

1. "[The Renaissance of Psychology](#)", Dr. George Pransky
2. "[The Enlightened Gardener](#)", Sydney Banks
3. "[The Inside Out Revolution](#)", Michael Neill
4. "[You Can be Happy No Matter What](#)", Richard Carlson
5. "[Coming Home](#)", Dr. Dicken Bettinger & Natasha Swerdloff
6. "[The Missing Link](#)", Sydney Banks
7. "[Slowing Down to the Speed of Life](#)", Richard Carlson & Joseph Bailey
8. "[The Wisdom Within](#)", Roger Mills & Elsie Spittle

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Appendix 1: Levels of Mental Health

Dr. George Pransky, co-developer of 3P (which, in turn, is based on the teachings of [Mr. Sydney Banks](#)), posits five levels of increasing mental health, each higher level representing an increased awareness of the link between our thoughts, our feelings, and our experiential reality.

So, what's *your* level on the mental health ladder?

Level 1: Chronic Deep Distress

Individuals at this level have zero thought awareness; every thought represents reality, no matter how delusional. Schizophrenics fall into this category, unable to question the validity of any thought. Unable to hold down a job or maintain personal relationships, such individuals are often placed under guardianship to protect them from their own frightening, self-created 'reality'.

Level 2: Chronic Distress

While not suffering from psychotic delusions, such individuals nonetheless fail to see any link between their thinking and their experienced reality. To them, it is external circumstances, not their own thinking, that causes their agitation. As a result, they feel victimized and waste much of their life trying to fix their many "problems". With such a distorted perception of life, work and personal relationships suffer.

Level 3: Chronic Stress

While possessing some thought recognition - for example, able to dismiss unpleasant thoughts in good times - they are easily agitated when things don't go their way. Further, such reactions are mistakenly considered both justified and perfectly normal - just the way life is. Unfortunately, given the frequency with which life fails to follow our desired script, such individuals experience stress and emotional upset with some frequency and pointlessly waste time trying to mold external circumstances to their liking.

Level 4: Well-Being

Understanding the link between the quality of thought and the quality of lived experience, such individuals are able to make suitable adjustments to their thinking whenever they feel distressed rather than uselessly trying to change the world around them. Emotionally intelligent, they get along easily with others and function at a high level.

Level 5: Profound Well-Being

Possessing a high degree of thought recognition, such individuals easily dismiss negative thoughts and so live free of stress. Seeing their own views as subjective opinions rather than concrete reality renders them open-minded, humble, and easy-going. People relax in their presence and they bring out the best in those around them. In possession of a calm mind and ease of being, such individuals are able to readily access their *innate intelligence* and so tend to be highly creative.

N.B. "*Innate intelligence*" refers to the intelligence that operates outside of our conscious awareness. This is the type of intelligence that leads to those "ah ha!" moments of profound insight that seem to come out of nowhere (for insight into innate intelligence see, "[Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain](#)", by Dr. David Eagleman).

3P posits that we can only access our innate intelligence when we are in what it refers to as "*Free-Flow Thinking*" mode, an effortless, almost non-thinking state accessible only when the mind is calm.

Its opposite, referred to as "*Process Thinking*", is the type of thinking we bring to bear on such things as school learning and problem solving. Unlike Free-Flow Thinking, Process Thinking feels effortful and, when over-used, negatively impacts mental well-being. Because Process Thinking relies on the manipulation of already-known information, it yields no profound insights.

Appendix 2: Selected 3P Quotes

While I encourage you to read all of the books listed above, here are some selected quotes from them to ponder:

"When people are awakened to the nature of their psychological lives, they experience new, wiser thinking about the same life circumstances that previously seemed problematic." *Dr. George Pransky*

"Thoughts taken as thoughts will come and go uneventfully, while those taken as 'reality' will persist and become a way of life. The distressed person will live in thoughts and feelings of overwhelm and dissatisfaction; the stressed person in feelings of tension. What each level thinks is real will appear to be real, and what appears to be thought will not take on a reality." *Dr. George Pransky*

"Rather than believing that we are seeing life realistically, we can learn to question our judgment when we're feeling off." *Richard Carlson*

"Remember that your thoughts are just thoughts. They cannot harm, frighten, or overwhelm you without your consent." *Richard Carlson*

"We don't experience the world; we experience our thinking about the world." *Michael Neill*

"No matter how long people have suffered, they're never more than one thought away from peace." *Michael Neill*

"You are free to pay attention to a thought or not. You are free to act on a thought or not." *Dicken Bettinger & Natasha Swordloff*

"When you let go of judgmental thinking, your spirits lift and you see life with more understanding and compassion." *Dicken Bettinger & Natasha Swordloff*

"Let your negative thoughts go. They are nothing more than passing thoughts. You are then on your way to finding the peace of mind you seek, having healthier feelings for yourself and for others." *Sydney Banks*

"Judging your own faults or the faults of others leads to unhappiness. A mind that dwells in non-judgment is a contented mind." *Sydney Banks*

"Tread not into yesterday's sorrows, for they are the pathways of despair." *Sydney Banks*

"We all live in separate realities." *Sydney Banks*

"When you understand the fact of separate realities, there is no logical reason to take personally what others say or do." *Richard Carlson*

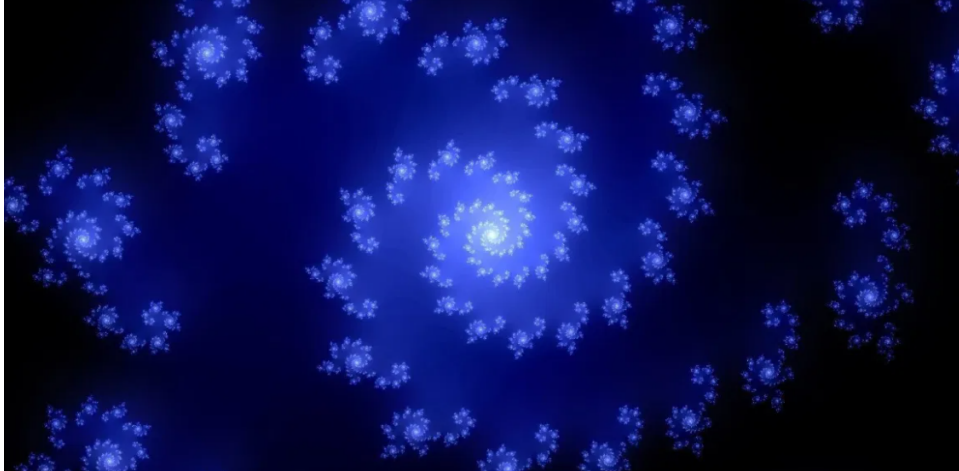
"When we know that other people (and ourselves) innocently interpret our beliefs as if they were reality, we can let go of the need to be right." *Richard Carlson*

"Had our past been different, our ideas about life would be different. Other people's beliefs are also a result of their past experiences. Had things been different, a totally different set of beliefs would have surfaced." *Richard Carlson*

"When people become aware of these Principles (3P) in action in their day to day lives, they find a new frame of reference, one composed of deeper wisdom, better judgment, and more happiness." *Roger Mills & Elsie Spittle*

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 19: DO THESE THINGS AND YOU WILL SUFFER

2600 years ago, the Buddha pointed out these basic, simple truths:

- **Bad things happen in life** and there's nothing we can do about them; into *every* life some rain must fall. He described this as 'the first arrow', one that strikes us and can't be avoided.
- **Suffering psychologically over these bad things is completely optional** because we bring such suffering upon ourselves - ***we are the authors of our own suffering***. He described this as 'the second arrow', the one we shoot into ourselves.
- We create needless suffering for ourselves **whenever we indulge in specific behaviour**.

So, what behaviour lies at the root of our psychological suffering?

Life's 'Second Arrows'

If you desire a peaceful life, **stop shooting second arrows into yourself!**

Don't Cling to What You Like

Don't cling to the things you love in life. Enjoy them while they're here but let them go once their time is done. Prized possessions, friends and family, good health, wonderful moments in time - all are fleeting. Cling to them, rail against their inevitable loss, and you WILL suffer.

Don't Rail Against What You Don't Like

Again, into every life some rain must fall. Complain about the inevitable rain and you WILL suffer. The alternative, embracing all of life with equanimity and acceptance, is the wiser path forward, the one that fosters psychological peace of mind.

Don't Adopt the Delusion of Self

If you view others as being separate and apart from yourself you WILL suffer. Adopting such a world view invites needless conflict where self-centred egos engage in pointless battles over supremacy of belief. The alternative, practicing [selflessness](#) and goodwill toward all, is the wise path to a peaceful, honorable life.

Don't Rail Against Impermanence

Nothing is permanent, everything is in constant flux. Expect differently and you WILL suffer.

The End of Psychological Suffering

Whenever life starts to feel like a struggle, bring these 'second arrows' to mind and see if you're not indulging in one (or more) of them, see if you're not resisting reality, resisting what IS. Odds are very high that you are.

Then, in the knowledge that you are creating your own hell, gently pull out the 'second arrows' - slow your mind, smile at your folly, and move forward with equanimity and acceptance.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Q&A

Q: You speak of "acceptance". There is much social injustice in the world. Are you saying we are to simply accept it and not take steps to confront it?

A: No, not at all. By acceptance I simply mean dropping all drama and just dealing with whatever situation life presents - no gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair. We just do what needs doing and move on - no muss, no fuss.

But acceptance definitely **does not mean passivity**. When faced with social injustice it is our duty as conscientious citizens to oppose it and take steps to effect change. The issue, however, is how best to bring this about.

Martin Luther King Jr. set the example. He espoused love as the means to effect change and vigorously spoke out against resorting to hatred and violence when confronting social injustice. So did Gandhi. So did Nelson Mandela. So did the Buddha. So do the teachings of Jesus.

And why this makes sense is that the natural human reaction, when faced with anger and aggression, is not to listen, is not to try to understand, but rather to tune out, to defend against, and even to counter-attack. Anger and violence as means to effect change make matters worse, not better.

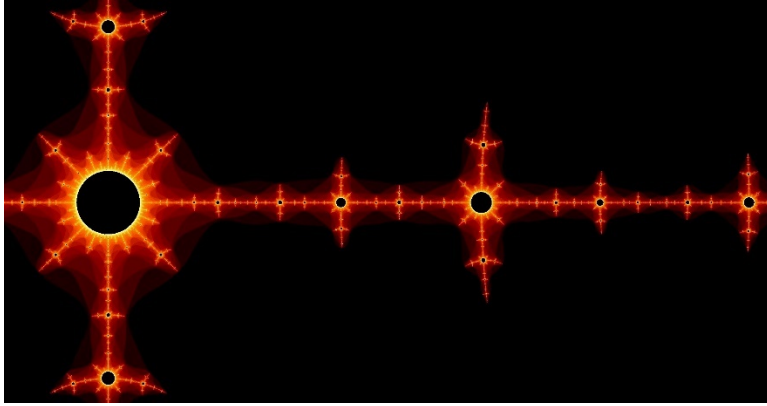
So, in answer to your question, acceptance does not mean we put up with injustice. We most definitely strive to effect positive societal change, but we do so always with respect (and a healthy dash of persistence).

And if respecting those with whom you have an issue is proving problematic, I encourage you to review the Compassion series of essays (*Chapters 22 – 27*).

- Q:** You say we're not to cling to friends and family we've lost. So, when a loved one dies, we're just to forget about them?
- A:** No, not at all, this is not what I mean by clinging. It's the difference between choosing to grieve positively or negatively. For a discussion of this point, I direct you to Chapter 8 ("*Mindful Grieving*").

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 20: PEACE IRRESPECTIVE

One of the key lessons of Buddhist philosophy is that experiencing a deep abiding inner peace is always within our grasp, ***irrespective of our external circumstances.***

But how can this be? How, when face-to-face with loss, illness, conflict, pain, failure, disgrace, or any of life's many vicissitudes, is inner peace even remotely attainable?

How? By abandoning all resistance to what IS.

To resist what already *is*, to resist reality, is insanity. Why so? Because not only does it contribute *nothing* toward a solution, it just makes matters worse by manifesting psychological suffering, for you and those unfortunate enough to be within fallout range of your futile, soul-sapping resistance to life.

The alternative? *Accept, then respond (or do nothing, as wisdom dictates).*

To be mindful is to accept, with equanimity, *whatever* life presents, *all of it*, the good *and* the bad. Indeed, the mere labeling of a situation as bad is, in itself, to be in a state of non-acceptance.

Through mindfulness practice we nurture the wisdom, courage, and fortitude to sit in the middle of life's messiness *and be okay with it all.*

We don't have to like it, but we accept it for what it is - ***just life.***

Peace is This Moment Without Judgment

"Do you think peace requires an end to war? Or tigers eating only vegetables?

Does peace require an absence from your boss, your spouse, yourself?

Do you think peace will come from some other place than here? Some other time than Now? In some other heart than yours?

Peace is this moment without judgment. That is all. This moment in the Heart-space where everything is welcome.

Peace is this moment without thinking that it should be some other way, that you should feel some other thing, that your life should unfold according to your plans.

Peace is this moment without judgment, this moment in the Heart-space where everything that is, is welcome."

Dorothy Hunt, founder of the San Francisco Centre for Meditation and Psychotherapy

The Peace of Wild Things

"When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound, in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of the wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.

I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting for their light.

For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things and Other Poems"

Only Now!

"What happens when we live open to this very moment, this very breath, this very experience, whether it is something the mind considers pleasant or unpleasant?"

What happens when we let all things be what they are Now? The mind cannot possibly understand how there could be peace if the moment is not peaceful, but the peace we truly are is Only This! Only Now!

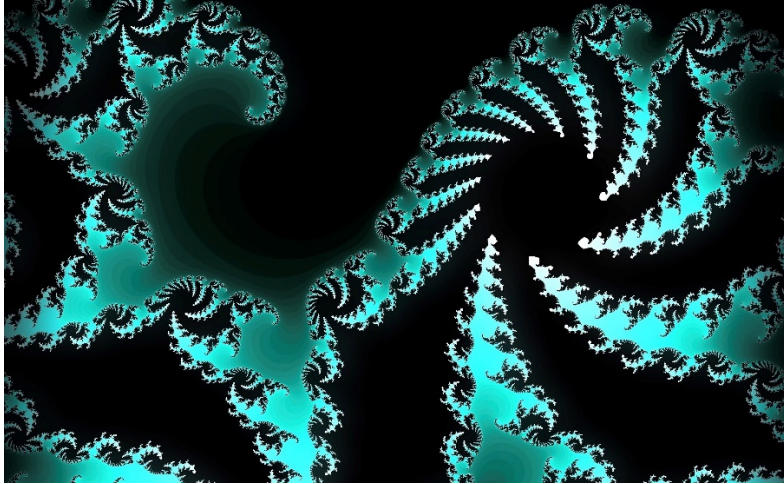
The great liberation that comes from living Now costs something. It costs us our desire to live "then" or "when".

At some point, there is a choice made - to live the truth of this moment rather than try to move away or move beyond; a choice to let this moment be what it is rather than refusing it."

Dorothy Hunt, excerpted from "Only This! - Poems and Reflections"

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 21: SECRET O' LIFE

**"The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time.
Any fool can do it, there ain't nothing to it.
Nobody knows how we got to the top of the hill.
But since we're on our way down, we might as well enjoy the ride.**

**The secret of love is in opening up your heart.
It's okay to feel afraid, but don't let that stand in your way.
Cause anyone knows that love is the only road.
And since we're only here for a while, might as well show some style. Give us a smile.**

**Isn't it a lovely ride, sliding down, gliding down,
try not to try too hard, it's just a lovely ride."**

James Taylor, singer/songwriter, from his 1977 hit, "[Secret O' Life](#)"

James Taylor got it right; life truly is "just a lovely ride".

And yes, it really is this simple. A life imbued with an ease of being, regardless of circumstance, does lie within our grasp.

And the only thing that stands in the way is our innocent misperception of reality.

"I don't expect any of us to know what it's like to be free of worry.

**All I ask is that when a tree or stone or cloud mentions the possibility,
we stop what we're doing, turn our heads, listen."**

Leath Tonino, "The Possibility" from his collection of poems, "Poems of Walking and Sitting"

The Wise Amoeba

Despite the fact that single-celled organisms do not possess a brain (and, therefore, consciousness), they nonetheless remain fully capable of surviving and, indeed, thriving. Bacteria such as cholera, tetanus, and tuberculosis are but three well-known examples of successful unicellular life.

It may surprise many to learn that such rudimentary organisms possess the ability to sense and move away from potential danger and to move toward sustenance.

This 'drive-to-survive' capability is an automated, unconscious, un-willed process built into *all* living things by evolution and natural selection, **including us**.

Careful reflection on this point makes it clear that the main difference between we humans' drive-to-survive and that of single-celled organisms is that ***we just happen to be conscious of what our body is up to***.

As I cover at length in these posts (Chapter 24 – "*The Illusion of Free Will*" and Chapter 25 – "*Blame – a Socially-Corrosive Misconception*"), we are not the captains of our ship - we don't will things to happen; ***we're simply witnesses to what our automated processes are up to***. Free will is simply how it *feels*, not how it *is*.

Just a Lovely Ride

Knowing fully that we're just along for a lovely ride in a self-driving vehicle, one that automatically attends to our survival, opens up the possibility of eschewing our stress-filled, emotionally-charged, hard-driven ways for a peaceful, restful existence filled with an ease of being.

It's the difference between seeing ourselves as the stressed driver of the car of our life and, instead, being the relaxed passenger in the back seat, casually observing the beauty of the world as it passes on by.

Or think of it this way. Unlike us, unicellular organisms don't get angry, anxious, jealous, envious, bored, impatient, or frustrated - they just live and thrive in life's lovely, automated, ride.

And so can we, with the wonderful added bonus that, unlike our unicellular cohabitants, **we get to consciously experience it all.**¹

"The meaning of life is just to be alive. It is so plain and so obvious and so simple.

And yet, everybody rushes around in a great panic as if it were necessary to achieve something beyond themselves."

Alan Watts, British writer and philosopher (1915-1973)

So, just sit back, relax, observe, and enjoy the lovely ride of life!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

¹ Choice in the Absence of Free Will

I have been asked on many occasions how we can choose a better psychological path in life if we lack free will. And that's a great question.

The fact of the matter is that we don't, of course, *choose* anything in life; our hard-wired, fully-automated, 'drive-to-survive' inner processes do all this for us - *we simply observe its choices.*

It all gets back to what drives [human behaviour](#), this being the combination and interplay of our biology, environment, and life experiences.

For example, the good fortune of experiencing this article could be all it takes for your automated system to sense an opportunity to enhance your ability to thrive and survive by diminishing your psychological stress.

Of course, not everyone's auto-pilot system possesses the requisite mix of biology, environment, and previous life experiences to recognize such opportunities when they present themselves. Such unlucky individuals will, unfortunately, continue to experience needlessly-elevated stress levels.

But, there's always hope! Next time (due to our constantly-changing mix of biology, environment, and experiences) that same unlucky individual's inner system may, in fact, seize upon a new opportunity to allay psychological stress.

Such is the luck-of-the-draw nature of life and why compassion should always be our default setting toward each other - ***because we don't get to choose.***

"Those swirls in the cream mixing into the coffee? That's us. Ephemeral patterns of complexity riding a wave of increasing entropy from simple beginnings to a simple end. We should enjoy the ride."

Dr. Sean Carroll, theoretical physicist and author of "[The Big Picture](#)"

COMPASSION



Chapter 22: WHY COMPASSION ALWAYS? – PART 1

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

Dalai Lama XIV

This essay, and the six that immediately follow, make the argument that society's response to harmful behaviour, no matter how egregious, should always be one of compassion, concern, caring, and understanding, not anger, hate, and judgment.

In short, society's assumption that *we are responsible for our own behaviour* is simply wrong, and these six essays on compassion lay out exactly why.

Here are the basic arguments that will be fleshed out:

- Human behaviour is impacted by innumerable factors *we neither choose nor control*.
- These factors are totally unique to each and every one of us, guaranteeing widely varying behaviour – none of them right or wrong, simply *different*.
- We don't get to choose our behaviour, because we can't – *it's physically impossible*.

The material that follows directly challenges many of our deeply-held beliefs about blame, responsibility, retribution, and behavioural choice. ***I ask only that you maintain an open mind.*** After all, it is only by subjecting our collective assumptions to ongoing assessment that we can ever hope to build a more just, compassionate society.

Why forgive and forget needs to replace judgment and anger

We look out at the world and what do we see? We see people doing things and saying things that we would never do and never say - puzzling things, often infuriating things - behavior that is simply inexplicable - *to us*.

And what do we do when we don't understand someone else's "wayward" behavior?

1. We assume we know why they behaved as they did.
 2. We take that assumption as reality.
 3. We sit in judgment of that person based on our assumption.
 4. We find them guilty as charged.
 5. And then we get angry with them.
- "Look at how he's driving! He's obviously an ignorant, self-centered jerk!" (*or, maybe he's a dad with a sick child in the back seat, and he's racing scared as hell to the hospital*)
 - "She didn't even come to the party! She's so stuck-up and anti-social!" (*or, maybe she's an introvert and finds noisy social events draining*)
 - "Look at how he's treating his son - he's such a terrible father!" (*or, maybe he was treated that way by his own dad and that's the best parenting he's capable of at that moment*)

While we judge our own actions and our own words by our known motives, known intentions, known mitigating factors, and known extenuating circumstances, we typically judge others based solely on their external actions.

And then, in our ignorance, *we assign malign motives to those actions.*

As covered in Chapter 3 ("*Mindless by Design*"), this is not our fault. Our evolutionary inheritance biases us towards the use of aggression because millennia ago such behavior kept us alive - better to act aggressively and be wrong than to act compassionately and be killed.

But we no longer need to act aggressively to stay alive. By assigning malign intent to others' behavior we create needless conflict and discord through our ignorance, and this has serious ramifications:

- *We upset ourselves* (which is terrible for our mental and physical well-being) and *we upset those around us.*
- *We add to the aggression of the world rather than to its peace.* In so doing, we create the world we *don't* want to live in rather than the world we *do*.

Aware of this human bias, we can start to do better; we can choose the path of compassion over aggression and the path of wisdom over ignorance.

**"I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself and then make a change"**

Michael Jackson, "Man in the Mirror"

WHY COMPASSION?

As mentioned at the outset, this post (and the five that follow) argue that whenever we encounter upsetting behavior in others, we should meet it with compassion and caring rather than judgment and anger.

This is not to say that we don't take the necessary steps to prevent an individual from doing further harm, *but we do so with respect and caring.*

But why should we do this? Three reasons come to mind:

1. ***We can never know why others behave as they do.*** As we will see, human behavior is impacted by innumerable factors, almost all of which are outside of our control and outside of our conscious awareness. It is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that what goes on in our brain is nothing more than biochemical reactions following the laws of physics. Mess with the physics and unfortunate consequences result - **consequences that we then mistake as purposely-bad behavior, with no context or mitigating circumstances whatsoever.**
2. ***None of us signed up for these factors*** - they were simply doled out randomly to each of us as part of life, luck of the draw.
3. ***Most people remain ignorant of mindfulness*** - they know of only one way to get through life - *habitually and, therefore, mindlessly.* We don't get angry with people who, through lack of training, don't know how to read, write, or do math. Why, then, should we get angry with those who have received zero training in mindfulness and who, as a result, and through no fault of their own, act in a mindless manner?

"I began to wonder whether people were thinking at all. Decades of research later, I have found the answer is a resounding 'no' – mindlessness is pervasive. In fact, I believe virtually all of our problems; personal, interpersonal, professional, and societal; either directly or indirectly, stem from mindlessness."

Dr. Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University

Simply put, it is wrongheaded for us to sit in judgement of others when ignorance of mindfulness remains the norm and when factors that we had no role in choosing, and with which we have no conscious acquaintance, drive our behavior, particularly our *worst* behavior.

“Most of what we do and think and feel is not under our conscious control”

David Eagleman, neuroscientist and adjunct professor, Stanford University and author of "[Incognito - The Secret Lives of the Brain](#)"

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HUMAN BEHAVIOR

The next time you find yourself negatively judging someone's behavior, stop and ask yourself if you know whether their actions may have been influenced by *any* of the factors laid out below.

Then ask yourself if compassion and understanding is not a wiser way forward – a better way forward – than getting angry and consigning that individual to your “bad person” column:

Sex

The vast majority of criminals are male (e.g. FBI data show that males make up 90% of those arrested for murder, 88% for robbery, 83% for arson, 82% for vandalism, 82% for car theft, and 80% for offences against family and children).

Under-developed prefrontal cortex (PFC)

A study of men with Antisocial Personality Disorder found that their prefrontal cortex was at least 10% smaller than average. This compromises impulse control, emotional control, and the ability to judge the consequences of one's actions.

Abnormal dopamine sensitivity

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps regulate attention, learning, and emotional responses, as well as acting on our brain's pleasure centers. Affected individuals tend to be impulsive and have a reduced ability to delay gratification.

Adolescence

The last brain region to fully mature is the prefrontal cortex (PFC), not fully functional until our mid-twenties. Given that the PFC is the locus of our executive functioning - impulse control, emotional control, and creativity - it should come as no surprise that adolescents tend to exhibit ill-judged behavior and exaggerated emotions.

Stress

Stress impairs our judgment, makes us impulsive, reactionary, aggressive, emotional, as well as more fearful. Stress also biases us toward selfishness.

Abnormal serotonin levels

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that plays a role in our feelings of happiness and well-being. Low levels of serotonin have been associated with impulsive aggression.

Testosterone

Testosterone has been found to boost impulsivity and risk-taking while making those already prone to aggression even more aggressive. Conversely, men with below-average levels of testosterone have been found to be rated as better parents.

Physical pain

An individual predisposed to aggression becomes even more so when in pain. In addition, those in pain often exhibit self-centered behavior with reduced empathy for others.

Hunger

When people are hungry, they become more aggressive and less charitable. In one study, judges who had recently eaten granted parole in 60% of their cases whereas judges who were hungry granted almost no parole.

Social environment

In the presence of women, men become more aggressive, more risk-taking, and more impulsive - unless the setting happens to dictate that status is enhanced by being sociable, in which case they exhibit more emollient behavior.

It has been found that sustained inter-group contact generally decreases prejudice. This is supported by the observation that those states in the U.S. with the fewest immigrants as a percentage of the population tend to have the most anti-immigrant views - a prime example of ignorance breeding fear.

Neighborhood

The presence of litter, graffiti, broken windows, and public drunkenness in a neighborhood leads to increased crime as it signals that people there don't care.

The state of a neighborhood also communicates cultural norms to children, thus exacerbating bad behavior in bad neighborhoods and instilling good behavior in good neighborhoods.

Climate

Hot temperatures have been found to lead to higher rates of violence.

Culture

Collectivist cultures (e.g. China, Japan) emphasize interdependence, harmony, conformity, and the needs and responsibilities of the group over those of the individual. In contrast, individualist cultures (e.g. Canada, U.S.A.) value independence, competition, personal achievement, uniqueness, and the needs and rights of the individual.

Cultures with greater income inequality have been found to have less social capital (i.e. less trust, less cooperation, less generosity, and less inclination to come to another's aid).

Socio-Economic Status

A child born to a family of low socio-economic status is at risk of being overly reactive to stress. They are also at risk of having stunted brain development leading to poor working memory, poor emotional control, and impulsive behavior.

It has been found that rich people tend to be less kind and to demonstrate less empathy and compassion.

Abnormal Oxytocin Sensitivity or Amount

An abnormally high level of the hormone oxytocin is associated with being more pro-social toward those similar to you and more antisocial toward those who are different from you.

Menstruation

As many as three of every four women experience some form of Perimenstrual Syndrome (PMS) whose behavioral symptoms include anxiety, depression, mood swings, irritability, food cravings, insomnia, poor concentration, and social withdrawal.

Menopause

Roughly 80% of menopausal women experience symptoms that include depression, insomnia, anxiety, and memory loss. In one British study, nearly half of affected women said it negatively impacted their work.

Economic Factors

Economic downturns increase the occurrence of spousal and child abuse.

Judgment Biases

Attractive people are generally judged to have better personalities and higher moral standards, to be kinder, more honest, friendlier, and more trustworthy than those rated as less attractive. They are more likely to be hired and to receive a higher salary. When accused of a crime, they are less likely to be convicted. These biases have been shown to exist in children as young as five.

Cognitive Load

A heavy cognitive load makes people more conservative, more likely to lie, less charitable, and less willing to help someone in need.

Lack of Sleep

Symptoms of sleep deprivation include irritability, a depressed mood, difficulty paying attention, poor memory, and a tendency to be more conservative than normal.

Genes

Pedophilia and sociopathy tend to run in families, suggesting a genetic component.

Studies have found that there is a genetic component to addiction, estimated to explain about half the likelihood of becoming addicted.

"Studies on twins suggest that mathematical ability is about 60% heritable. Now research in the journal, PLOS Biology, has mapped exactly how tiny changes in DNA bless some with mathematical wizardry and condemn others to relative innumeracy."

Economist magazine, October 2020

Pre-Natal Conditions

There is evidence that pedophilia is associated with pre-natal endocrine abnormalities.

High maternal stress can stunt fetal brain development and make the child more prone to anxiety and depression.

Maternal malnutrition, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, can impair fetal brain development.

Brain Damage

Those with damage to their prefrontal cortex tend to see moral dilemmas in very pragmatic, even cold-hearted terms.

Those with a damaged amygdala tend to be more accepting of unkind behavior.

A large percentage of death row inmates have a history of damage to their frontal cortex, particularly in childhood before the brain is fully developed.

One thing that adult pedophiles have in common is a greater incidence of having suffered from brain injuries during childhood.

Damage to the frontal cortex can lead to socially inappropriate behavior, apathy, hypersexuality, bursts of compulsive gambling, stealing, and aggressiveness. Such individuals often show poor judgment in choosing friends and partners and don't learn from past bad experience.

Those suffering from frontal cortex dementia often become disinhibited and exhibit socially-inappropriate behavior.

“Criminals do have broken brains, brains that are physically different from those of the rest of us.”

Dr. Adrian Raine, “[The Anatomy of Violence](#)”

Brain Differences

Studies of the brains of transgender individuals show that they more closely resemble the sex they feel themselves to be rather than their biological sex.

Psychopaths' amygdalae have been found to be smaller than normal. Such individuals are also less reactive to pain. Further, they have been found to have decreased activity in their frontal cortex and less coupling of their prefrontal cortex (the wise part of our brain) to other brain regions.

A four-year-old's openness to new toys has been found to predict how open they'll be as an adult to novelty and social change.

Of those on Death Row in the U.S., by some measures *all of them* suffer from some form of disability, and many have a low IQ.

People scoring high in conscientiousness have been found to have more brain matter in the part of the brain responsible for planning for the future and making decisions.

People scoring high in agreeableness have been found to have less brain matter in a part of the brain responsible for processing emotions and making decisions.

“Many of us like to think that all adults possess the same capacity to make sound choices. It’s a nice idea, but it’s wrong. So, when it comes to thinking about blameworthiness, the first difficulty to consider is that people do not choose their own developmental path.”

David Eagleman

Sexual Orientation

Why are gay men attracted to men? Why are lesbian women attracted to women? Why are heterosexuals attracted to members of the opposite sex? Science clearly indicates that choice has nothing to do with it. Instead, factors such as genetics, prenatal hormone levels, brain structure, and birth order all play potential roles. For example, it has been found that the chance of male homosexuality is greater for the last-born son.

Upbringing

Risk factors for developing sociopathic behavior include physical or mental abuse as a child, parental neglect, family instability, witnessing violence, and growing up in general chaos. Sociopathic behavior includes having no regard for right or wrong, ignoring the feelings of others, lying, manipulative behavior, impulsiveness, hostility, abusive behavior, risky behavior, and being irresponsible. The prevalence of sociopathy is much higher among those in prison than the general population.

Studies find that children raised in dysfunctional families have a higher risk of substance abuse, impaired cognitive ability, impaired emotional and impulse control, and a higher risk of exhibiting antisocial, violent behavior.

“While our decisions may seem like free choices, no good evidence exists that they actually are”

David Eagleman

Drug Use

Athletes abusing anabolic steroids often exhibit increased irritability, aggression, anger, and anxiety (“roid rage”).

Opioid abusers may experience confusion, disorientation, mood swings, anxiety, and a distorted perception of reality.

Loneliness

Loneliness is associated with an increase in the number of a specific type of immature immune cell known to trigger anxiety. Feeling lonely also increases the level of a type of signaling molecule in the brain associated with social withdrawal, heightened suspicion of the outside world, and an increased tendency toward decisions that involve little risk. Loneliness is also associated with increased irritability, self-centredness, and defensiveness.

Sexual Arousal

Studies find that, when in a state of sexual arousal, our moral judgment becomes compromised.

“... it is neither biology alone nor environment alone that determines the final product of a personality. When it comes to the ‘nature versus nurture’ question, the answer almost always includes both. This is the reason people come to the table with quite different ways of seeing the world, dissimilar personalities, and varied capacities for decision making.”

David Eagleman

WHY COMPASSION, UNDERSTANDING, and FORGIVENESS SHOULD BE OUR DEFAULT APPROACH TO LIFE

So, someone does or says something to upset us, *what do we do next?*

In light of the multitude of factors outlined above, all of which have the potential to materially impact human behavior, ***is it not patently unfair and unjustified for us to react in anger, as is the current norm in our society?***

Indeed, should you still feel justified reacting in anger, then reasonable responses to these three questions seem in order:

1. What exactly are you getting angry at?
2. Where do you draw the line for assessing if someone should be considered ‘*responsible*’ for their own behavior?
3. What would such a line even mean?

Question #1: What Are You Getting Angry At?

If you're going to get angry over what you perceive to be someone's errant behavior, what exactly are you getting angry at?:

That person's hormone levels? Their hunger? Their behavioral disorder? Their prenatal conditions? Their upbringing? Their socio-economic status? Their culture? Their brain structure? Their stress level? Their cognitive load? Their neighborhood? Their lack of positive role models? Their drug addiction? Their temperament? Their peers? Their age? Their illness? Their pain? Their genetic inheritance? The economy? Their lack of sleep? Their head injury from high school? The parenting style they were exposed to as a child? The physical and mental abuse their grandfather suffered as a child? and on, and on, and on.

Question #2: Where do you draw the line for assessing if someone is 'responsible' for their behavior?

In law, it is possible for a criminal to be found not guilty by reason of insanity. In the U.S. it is possible to be spared the death penalty by reason of insufficient mental capacity to understand right from wrong.

In other words, lines are drawn to separate those who are deemed "responsible" for their behavior and those who are not.

But where do we draw such a line, and how do we justify it? For example, in some U.S. states an IQ under 70 is deemed to be the cut-off line below which the death penalty cannot be applied. But why 70? Why not 62 or 83? Or why not the average of five IQ tests over the span of a two-year period?

With any fair assessment, it quickly becomes apparent that any such line is totally arbitrary, unfair, unjust, and without validity; there is no justifiable cut-off line for being considered *responsible for one's behaviour*.

Question #3: What Would Such a Line Even Mean?

Lastly, even if a cut-off line was agreed upon to distinguish between someone responsible for their behavior and someone not, what exactly would such a cut-off line mean given how different we are from each other? What exactly would such a line mean given all the biological and environmental factors that can impact human behavior, ***and over which we have near-zero say or control***? In truth, such a line would be meaningless.

"Our worst behaviors, ones we condemn and punish, are the products of our biology."

Dr. Robert Sapolsky, professor of biology and neurology, Stanford University and author of ["Behave - The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst"](#)

COMPASSION

Think of some of the most admired historical figures and the traits they hold in common - the Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Each espoused compassion, understanding, forgiveness, patience, and eschewed aggression.

Given that these are some of the traits we most admire, and given the information presented herein, four things should by now be very clear:

1. ***We need to substitute compassion for judgement and anger*** whenever we encounter others' "wayward" behavior.
2. ***Each of us will take a turn exhibiting excruciatingly bad behavior*** due to factors over which we have no control and about which we have no conscious awareness.
3. In such circumstances, ***each one of us would want to be shown compassion and understanding*** rather than anger and blame.
4. It follows, then, that ***this same courtesy should be extended to everyone*** – sitting in judgment of others' perceived wayward behavior simply has no justification.

At each fork in the road of life we get to choose the path of aggression or the path of compassion.

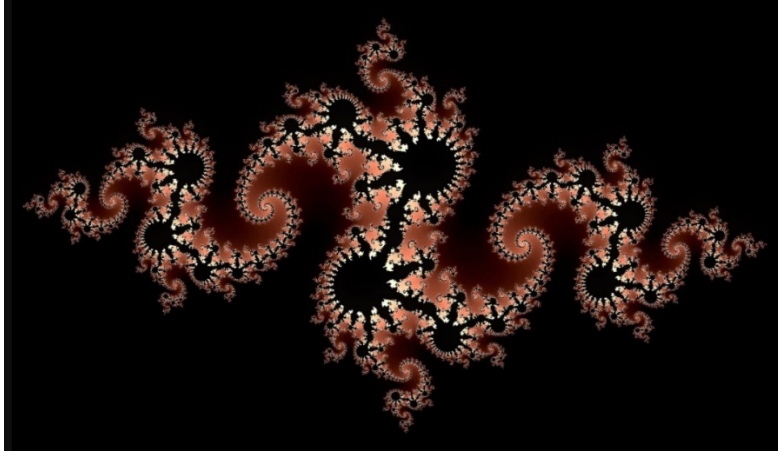
It is compassion, not anger, that is supported by the evidence.

It is compassion, not anger, that makes us better people.

And it is compassion, not anger, that makes our world a better place for us all.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 23: WHY COMPASSION ALWAYS? – PART 2

In [Part 1](#) we learned of the many factors that impact human behaviour, none of which we choose nor have any control over.

In light of this "there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I" reality, the logic of universal compassion just naturally follows.

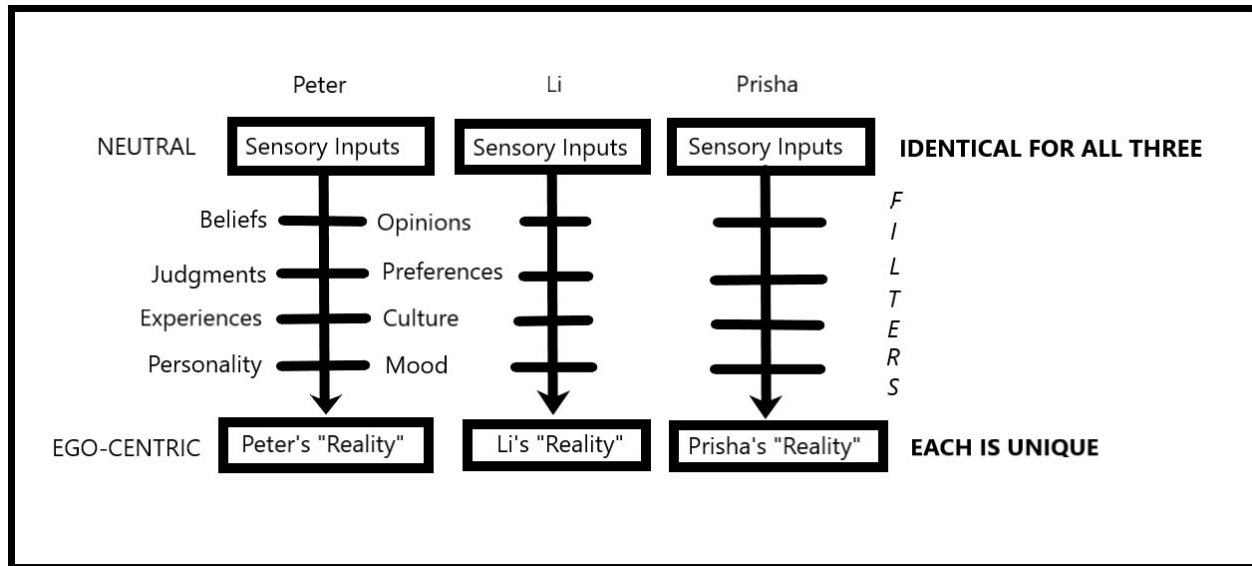
And yes, this means even toward the most disagreeable of individuals, because failing to do so is akin to getting angry at someone for, say, having blue eyes.

In short, while we see the logic in not judging someone for physical attributes - like blue eyes - we utterly fail to make the connection that behaviour too is driven 100% by physical factors.

After all, how could it not be? Ultimately everything we think, say, or do must be rooted in the chemistry and physics of our body - *a chemistry and physics molded by factors totally unique to each of us.*

Our Behavioural Filters

Here is a depiction of what I'm getting at:



While we each take in the same neutral sensory information (i.e. sights, sounds, scents, etc.) each of us nonetheless live in our own unique 'reality'.

Why? Because sensory inputs pass through our unique set of filters - biological factors, life experiences, culture, current mood, etc., etc. As a result, despite each of us experiencing the same inputs, we nonetheless perceive 'reality' differently.

To you, your personal reality only *appears* to be the "correct" one because you couldn't have any other 'reality' given your unique combination of filters.

Try out this thought experiment. If you and I were to swap all the atoms in our respective bodies, atom for atom, eventually you would become me and I would become you - your reality would become mine and mine yours.

Suddenly, you and I would view the world very differently from the way we previously had. What used to seem so obviously right and proper may now seem rather questionable; perhaps even downright *wrong*.

This is how conflict so innocently arises; we each mistakenly believe our own reality to be "correct" because it's the only one we know, the only one we *can* know given our unique set of filters.

Why Compassion Always?

But filters are neither correct nor incorrect, they're just different.

What this means is that *your* take on reality is just as valid as *mine*, and vice versa. Therefore, *it necessarily follows that everyone's take on reality is equally valid.*

In light of this, four conclusions naturally follow:

1. **Differences of opinion are inevitable, something to be expected, and therefore nothing to get upset about.**
2. **Needing to be right makes zero sense.** Why? Because we each come to the table with different views of what's right. But individual filters aren't right or wrong, just different, so all views are equally 'right' - to each of us individually and uniquely.
3. **Taking offence makes zero sense.** Why? Because the other person's words and actions *aren't about you*. They simply reflect their perception of how the world ought to work in light of their own personal filters. So, it's not about you - it's about them.
4. **Compassion, always, is the only logical way forward.**

In practice what this means is thinking "**Filters**" and "**Unique Realities**" each and every time you encounter a challenging individual. You may think them odd, and they may think the same about you, but compassion must nonetheless reign because neither you nor they had any say over the factors and filters that make us each uniquely different.

"We can see that our beliefs are merely a function of past conditioning and experiences. Had our past been different, our ideas about life would be different."

Richard Carlson, "[You Can Be Happy No Matter What](#)"

Most fortuitously, 'compassion, always' also fosters a kinder, gentler, more caring world for us all.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Addendum: Compassion Q&A

Q: *What about someone like, say, Hitler? Surely such evil individuals don't merit compassion.*

A: Yes, they most certainly do. First off, describing someone as "evil" is problematic because it implies choice; that someone *chooses* to be evil. But do they really? After all, ***we don't get to choose the factors and filters impacting our behaviour.*** Hitler's world view made complete sense to him given all the factors that led to him being him. *But he had no say in those factors,* so he deserves our compassion. Everyone does.

Q: *So then, we just sit back and let such people wreak havoc in society?*

A: Of course not. Compassion doesn't mean we don't take steps to prevent someone like a Hitler from causing harm. But we root such steps in compassion and respect, not in blame, anger, hatred, and vengeance.

Q: *Okay, what about people who, say, lead a life of crime but then turn their lives around and become model citizens. If they can choose to be better people, surely anyone can if they try hard enough.*

A: There's that problematic belief in choice again. It is illusory. If such an individual manages to turn a troubled life around, it's because they were fortunate enough to be dealt behavioural factors that provide them with the impetus, insight, and ability to do so. In the absence of such factors, it wouldn't even occur to them why they may wish to change, nor would they possess the ability to effect such change.

For example, [studies have found](#) that, on average, the IQs of convicts are lower than that of law-abiding citizens. This leads to two pertinent observations. First, we don't get to choose our IQ. Second, we must ask ourselves if possessing a lower IQ increases or decreases the odds of both deciding to change one's life for the better and, having so decided, to also possess the ability to do so. I believe the answer is obvious; those cursed with low IQ struggle to make wise choices, *through no fault of their own.* And this is why '*compassion always*' just makes sense, *because we don't get to choose the factors and filters that make us who we are.*

Q: *So, we're stuck being who we are then? We can't become better people?*

A: Again, if an individual is fortunate enough to have been dealt the factors pertinent to self-reflection, motivation, and the intellectual capacity to effect personal change then yes, they can most definitely take steps to better themselves. In fact, a daily mindfulness and meditation practice is one of the best means to do so, in effect augmenting our set of behavioural filters.

However, there are also individuals who, *through no fault of their own*, lack such factors/filters and so are, in effect, largely stuck being who they are. Of course, there is always hope for each of us because behavioural factors are not static; they change over time impacted by new life experiences and changes to our internal chemistry and physics.

So even an individual initially lacking the means to mold themselves into a better citizen of the world can experience an "ah ha!" moment that permits them to turn their life around. It's just much less likely that they ever will.

Q: *How does forgiveness differ from compassion?*

A: Whereas compassion is a coming together of equals, forgiveness implies a subtle superiority of the forgiver over the supposed transgressor; a magnanimous favor bestowed. Further, forgiveness implies choice - that the transgressor could have behaved differently, but *chose* not to. But as discussed above, the concept of choice is illusory. Yes, *after the fact* an individual may regret their actions and, in light of this new life experience, alter their behaviour *next time* but, at the moment they transgressed, they simply could not have chosen differently (because they had not yet experienced the regret necessary to alter their behaviour *this time*). As a result, the word 'forgiveness' has been permanently deleted from my vocabulary, replaced by '*compassion, always*'.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 24: THE ILLUSION OF FREE WILL

Free will is an illusion.

And why this matters, and matters deeply, is that the mistaken belief in free will hinders us from creating a more compassionate society, one free from angered moral judgments about each other's behaviour - judgments that, in the absence of free will, are seen for what they truly are: *indefensible*.

Just give a moment's thought to all the hateful, self-righteous vilification meted out by society rooted in the unquestioned and unchallenged belief that humans possess the ability to **choose** their behaviour and so are **responsible for** that behaviour:

- The drug addict who could have *chosen* not to get involved with drugs. *Condemn her!*
- The shoplifter who could have *chosen* not to steal. *Vilify him!*
- The abusive husband who could have *chosen* not to beat his wife and kids. *Punish him!*
- The murderer who could have *chosen* to live a law-abiding life. *Execute him!*

Such misplaced hate and moral outrage have tragic real-world implications:

In the early hours of 13 January 2021, convicted murderer, Lisa Montgomery, was executed by the U.S. government. Her lawyers had asked then-President, Donald Trump, for clemency, citing mental health issues brought on by a horrific childhood where physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of her mother and her mother's boyfriends was routine. Clemency was denied.

On 14 July 2020, convicted murderer, Daniel Lewis Lee, was executed by the U.S. government. Then Attorney General, William Barr, said, "*Lee finally faced the justice he deserved.*"

The justice he *deserved*? Really? Did he really *deserve it*? Only if we continue to mistakenly cling to the illusion that is free will.

Here's the Problem

A moment's reflection on the points that follow make it clear that ***we're not the ones driving the car of our actions*** - we didn't *make* them happen. Why? Because we *couldn't* make them happen.

Free Will Problem #1: The Laws of Physics

Consider this: as the universe unfolds, what is permitted to happen in each subsequent moment is constrained by and driven by three factors:

1. The current state of all that the universe is comprised of - all its atoms, all its energy, everything.
2. The laws of physics that dictate what these components are able to do next within the strict bounds of these physical laws.
3. Random quantum fluctuations that introduce a dash of uncertainty into the entire process.

Therefore, to posit the existence of free will is to assert that one of the following statements is true:

- That we have the ability to *control* these factors. False.
- That humans are *not* part of the universe and so answer to *different* physical laws. Also false.
- That we *are* part of the universe but that, *through the use of our minds*, we have the ability to override the laws of physics. Absurdly false.

Because we are obviously part of the universe, it necessarily follows that we are, indeed, subject to these three factors. Therefore, the only logical conclusion is that our behaviour – what we do in each subsequent moment – is also constrained by and driven by these factors, not by some magical mind power. ***There is no room for the existence of free will in this picture.***

Free Will Problem #2: What Causes the Cause Behind a Behaviour?

Let's say we have a thought about having a coffee. But a thought is nothing more than a biochemical reaction happening in our brain. Therefore, in order to even *have* that thought, a whole chain reaction of biochemical events has to first occur in our brain to create it.

But who exactly initiates that chain reaction? It couldn't be us because we - *just now* - had that thought about having a coffee.

In order to have *initiated* the chain reaction of biochemical events leading to the creation of that thought about having a coffee we would first have had to have had a thought *about* having a thought *about* having a coffee.

But, in order to have a thought *about* having a thought *about* having a coffee, we would first have had to have had a thought *about* that thought as well!

You see the problem here?! There is no possible way for us to be the prime mover behind our thoughts - it's simply physically impossible. ***There is no room for the existence of free will in this picture.***

"You can do what you decide to do - but you cannot decide what you will decide to do."

Sam Harris - "[Free Will](#)"

"What is more likely, that thinking drives biological activity or that biological activity drives thinking? And if you believe the former, what exactly is it that manifests the thinking? Or does thinking simply spring fully formed out of thin air with no prior causes? Does this sound even remotely plausible? No, clearly it does not. Ipso facto, free will is an illusion."

Anonymous

Problem #3: All Thoughts and Actions Arise from Goopy Brain Stuff

When we make the apparent decision to pick up a pencil, that thought obviously takes place inside our brain; neurons fire, biochemicals are released, energy is made available to drive it all, etc., etc..

But here's the thing - we can't consciously control *any* of these things - they just happen; just like we don't consciously control the pumping of our heart or the functioning of our kidneys.

Consider this. Go and observe the antics of a squirrel. Is he working through his well-considered to-do list for the day as he scampers around? Of course not. We attribute a squirrel's actions entirely to instinct, its behaviour controlled and dictated entirely by its biology.

So, what anatomical feature is it in humans that supposedly endows *us* with the ability to control our biology - the goopy stuff of the brain - *through the force of free will?*

Of course, *there is no such anatomical feature.* All mammalian brains share the same basic structural features (hardly a surprise given our shared evolutionary ancestry).

If free will exists then it must necessarily follow *that there is a part of our brain that stands separate and apart from the rest of it* in order to assert control over that other part. **But no such part exists.**

This point is adroitly made by Dr. Robert Sapolsky of Stanford University in his wonderful book, "[Behave - The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst](#)":

"Here's how I've always pictured mitigated free will:

There's the brain - neurons, synapses, neurotransmitters, receptors, brain-specific transcription factors, epigenetic effects, gene transpositions during neurogenesis.

Aspects of brain function can be influenced by someone's prenatal environment, genes and hormones, whether their parents were authoritative or their culture egalitarian, whether they witnessed violence in childhood, when they had breakfast. It's the whole shebang, all of this book.

And then, separate from that, in a concrete bunker tucked away in the brain, sits a little man (or woman, or ungendered individual), a homunculus, at a control panel. And the homunculus sits there controlling behaviour. A homunculus in your brain, but not of it, operating independently of the material rules of the universe that constitute modern science."

Needless to say, no such homunculus exists. Once again, ***there is no room for the existence of free will in this picture.***

Directly Experiencing the Absence of Free Will

For the next five minutes pay careful attention to your actions and note how many of them, *if any*, are the direct result of your *conscious intervention*.

For example, you bring your hand to your face to scratch an itch. Did you first think, "Gee, I've got an itchy spot on the left side of my nose. I think I'll raise my arm two feet, three inches, move my hand within 2.5 inches of my face, and then move my index finger (but definitely not my thumb or other fingers) to scratch that spot; but I'll be sure to only apply a quarter pound of pressure and, oh yes, avoid using too much finger nail as I don't wish to draw blood."

Of course not!

And another example. You're sitting in a chair and suddenly shift your butt slightly to the left. Did you consciously think, "Gee, I'm feeling a bit of discomfort under the right side of my buttocks. I think I'll shift my entire body a quarter inch to the left (but definitely not half an inch) to relieve the pressure."

No! Never crossed your mind! It just happened, all on its own, *and your only role was that of passive observer of your behaviour.*

Both examples, and many more easily uncovered through careful observation, illustrate my point - **we mistakenly assume we are the *authors* of our behaviour when, in fact, we are nothing more than the *observers* of that behaviour.**

Yes, we're certainly adept at coming up with convincing stories *after the fact* to explain and justify why we did what we just did but, in reality, we don't have the slightest clue!

"We have ways of retrospectively telling stories about our actions as though the actions were always our idea."

"When one part of the brain makes a choice, other parts quickly invent a story to explain why."

"Hidden programs drive actions, and the left hemisphere makes justifications. This idea of retrospective storytelling suggests that we come to know our own attitudes and emotions, at least partially, by inferring them from observations of our own behaviour."

Dr. David Eagleman, "[Incognito - The Secret Lives of the Brain](#)"

The Basis for a Better World

Because free will is an illusion, it naturally follows that:

1. **We don't get to choose our behaviour**; it's molded by life experiences over which we have no choice and driven by inaccessible neuronal subroutines over which we have no control. ***In all animals but ourselves we call it instinct. Seems a tad arrogant on our part, don't you think?***
2. Since we don't get to choose our behaviour, **we cannot be held responsible for our behaviour.**
3. And since we can't be held responsible for our behaviour, **we shouldn't be judged for our behaviour.**

With free will exposed for what it is - an illusion - ***the foundations underpinning so much of the world's hate, moral outrage, and cries for retribution utterly crumble.***

And once we see the innocence behind each other's actions we make much-needed room for compassion, caring, and understanding to arise - the *basis for a better world for us all.*

"Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity."

[Pema Chodron](#), Buddhist nun and author

So, the Criminals Go Free Do They!!!

Of course not. Society still has to be protected from dangerous individuals by locking them safely away. Those who can be rehabilitated are helped to do so. Those who are incapable of rehabilitation are warehoused for life.

But this is all done with respect, compassion, caring, and understanding. In such an enlightened society as this we no longer blame criminals for being who they are or for what they did. After all, they could no more have chosen not to commit their crime than you could have chosen not to take that last piece of chocolate cake. In the absence of free will there is no place for hate, vengeance, or retribution.

"What does it mean to say that rapists and murderers commit their crimes of their own free will? If this statement means anything it must be that they could have behaved differently. They could have resisted the impulse to do so - with the universe, including their brains, in precisely the same state it was in at the moment they committed their crimes. But the moment we catch sight of the stream of causes that precede their conscious decisions, reaching back into childhood and beyond, their culpability begins to disappear."

"I think that losing the sense of free will has only improved my ethics - by increasing my feelings of compassion and forgiveness."

"Once we recognize that even the most terrifying predators are, in a very real sense, unlucky to be who they are, the logic of hating them begins to unravel."

Sam Harris

So, We Can Never Hope to Better Ourselves?

Once again, of course not. Human behaviour is influenced by both nature and nurture - our biology *and* our life experiences.

While we can't do much about our biology, *most of us* (but not all - more on this below) have the ability to influence our life experiences. For example, I used to be very judgmental of others' behaviour; until I was introduced to Mindfulness by one of my clients.

The more I learned about it the less judgmental and the more compassionate and understanding I became. I literally changed myself for the better (to be more precise, *I influenced changes to my brain through the mechanism of [neural plasticity](#), for the better*).

But I can't, and don't, take any credit for this. What made my brain conducive to neuronal restructuring? *I don't know*. Why did I find Mindfulness study interesting? *I don't know*. Where did I get the determination to delve into it as deeply as I have? *I don't know*. What made me want to start a blog about it to share its hopeful message widely? *I don't know*.

And here's the thing - *I can never know*. All I can rest my hat on is that some combination of nature and nurture gifted me with the ability to better myself. And for this I am thankful, but I certainly can't take credit for it.

And then there are those unfortunate individuals for whom nature and nurture have conspired to stunt their desire and/or ability to steer themselves toward a better path in life.

Do such individuals deserve punishment for factors over which they have no control? Of course not. I don't deserve any credit for my good fortune, and they don't deserve to be faulted for their misfortune.

Did Daniel Lewis Lee get the justice he *deserved*?

I hope by now, in light of everything we've covered in this essay (as well as the two previous chapters) the answer is abundantly clear:

"Compassion, always" is our only defensible, and sensible, way forward.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Sources (and highly-suggested reading)

- [**Free Will**](#) - by Sam Harris
- [**Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain**](#) - by Dr. Daniel Eagleman
- [**The Illusion of Conscious Will**](#) - by Dr. Daniel Wegner
- [**Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst**](#) - by Dr. Robert Sapolsky
- [**For the law, neuroscience changes nothing and everything**](#) - by Dr. Joshua Greene and Dr. Jonathan Cohen

"We experience willing a walk in the park, winding a clock, or smiling at someone, and the feeling keeps our notion of ourselves as persons intact. Our sense of being a conscious agent who does things comes at a cost of being technically wrong all the time. The feeling of doing is how it seems, not what it is - but that is as it should be. All is well, because the illusion makes us human."

Dr. Daniel Wegner

"You and I seem to sense first and act second. But in your brain, sensing actually comes second. Your brain is wired to initiate your actions *before* you're aware of them. The brain is a predicting organ. It launches your next set of actions based on your past experience and current situation, and it does so outside of your awareness."

Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, "[Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain](#)"

"In Chapter 16 I will argue that it is wrong to think that understanding must lead to forgiveness – mainly because I think that a term like "forgiveness", and others related to criminal justice (e.g. "evil", "soul", "volition", and "blame"), are incompatible with science and should be discarded."

Dr. Robert Sapolsky

"We need to set aside the notion that our choices and decisions and actions have their ultimate origin within each of us, that they are brought into being by our independent agencies, that they emerge from deliberations that stand beyond the reach of physical law. We need to recognize that although the *sensation* of free will is real, the capacity to exert free will – the capacity for the human mind to transcend the laws that control physical progression – is not."

"To sum up: We are physical beings made of large collections of particles governed by nature's laws. Everything we do and everything we think amounts to motions of those particles. And since all observations, experiments, and valid theories confirm that particle motion is fully controlled by mathematical rules, we can no more intercede in this lawful progression of particles than we can change the value of pi."

Dr. Brian Greene, "[Until the End of Time](#)"

"You want so desperately to believe that you determine things in your life, yet that belief has no true substance. It floats like a ghost in a mind machine forged by ancient evolutionary forces. You were as helpless in deciding to buy this book as I was in writing it."

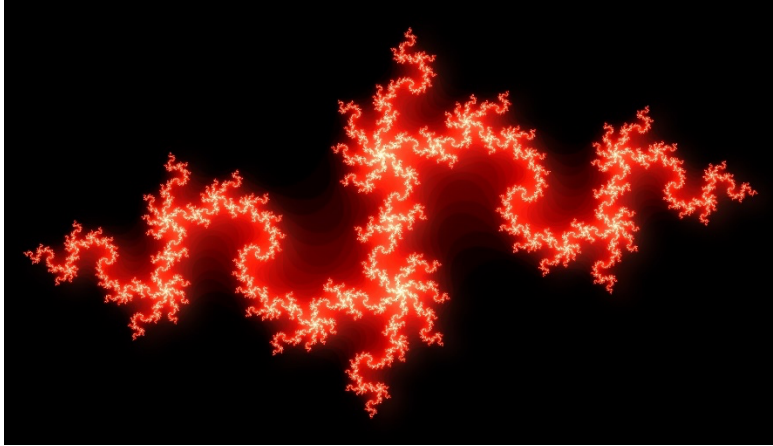
"Free will is sadly an illusion – a mirage."

Dr. Adrian Raine, '[The Anatomy of Violence](#)'

"Let's first be clear about what free will is *not*. Free will is not an intervention in the flow of physical systems in the universe, more specifically in the brain, making things happen that wouldn't otherwise happen. This "spooky" free will invokes Cartesian dualism, demands freedom from the laws of cause and effect, and offers nothing of explanatory value in return."

"And when making the tea, it certainly *seemed to me* that I could have made coffee instead. But I didn't want coffee, I wanted tea, and since I can't choose my wants, I made tea. Given the precise state of the universe at that time, which includes the state of my body and brain, all of which have prior causes *I could not have done otherwise.*"

Dr. Anil Seth, author of ["Being You - A New Science of Consciousness"](#)



Chapter 25: BLAME – A Socially-Corrosive Misconception

Blame is so taken for granted that we never stop to ponder whether it makes any sense. *Is there any justification for blaming someone for their behaviour?*

As I will argue in this post, *no, there is not.*

In short, blame is an unjustifiable, socially-corrosive concept that stands fully at odds with science. For the betterment of *all* human relations, it should be relegated to the dustbin of human ignorance, to be replaced by compassion and understanding.

In so doing, gone would be the acrimony so harmful to society - children estranged from parents, siblings not speaking to one another, friendships dashed, marriages torn apart, nations at war - ***and all of it rooted in the false premise that we are each responsible for our own behaviour.***

We are not, because we cannot be.

“In chapter 16 I will argue that it is wrong to think that understanding must lead to forgiveness – mainly because I think that a term like “forgiveness” and others related to criminal justice (e.g. evil, soul, volition, and blame), are incompatible with science and should be discarded.”

Dr. Robert Sapolsky, [“Behave: The biology of humans at our best and worst”](#)

Why Blame is Baseless

Blame is rooted in the widespread misconception that:

1. We are each **responsible** for our actions because,
2. We **will** them to happen, and so,
3. **Could have chosen to behave differently.**

But this line of thinking is deeply flawed for two reasons:

Reason #1: We don't will things to happen because this is a physical impossibility. What I'm getting at here is that we simply cannot be the prime mover of the electro-chemical workings of our brain any more than we can consciously control the functioning of our pancreas or liver. Yes, we certainly have the *illusion* of willful choice, but that's all it is, that's all it can be - an illusion, a false perception.

And if you find this assertion implausible, I encourage you to read (and deeply ponder) [this post on free will](#) as well as the numerous quotes listed at the end of this article **because the mistaken belief in free will is, on its own, corrosive to compassionate human interaction.**

"There is never a time-zero when you decide to do something, because every neuron in the brain is driven by other neurons."

Dr. David Eagleman, "The Brain - the Story of You"

Reason #2: If we could, in fact, choose to behave differently, we should not expect to find a correlation between behaviour and factors such as: *pre-natal nutrition, childhood adversity, brain trauma, sex, hormone levels, temperature, life experiences, genetics, sleep quality, socioeconomic status, hunger, exposure to toxins, culture, age,* But we DO find such correlations, in spades. In fact, it is clear that human behaviour is directly influenced by innumerable factors, factors we neither choose nor control, factors which operate largely outside of our conscious awareness.

Given such circumstances, how can blame possibly be justified? Quite simply, it cannot.

"We are constantly being shaped by seemingly irrelevant stimuli, subliminal information, and internal forces we don't know a thing about."

"Our worst behaviours, ones we condemn and punish, are the products of our biology."

Dr. Robert Sapolsky

Anatomy of a Behaviour

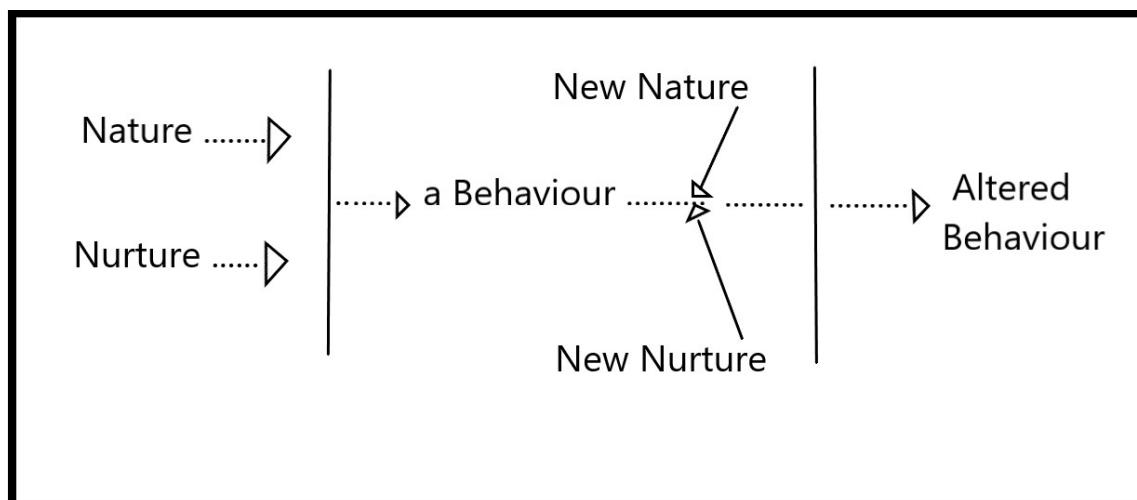
Behaviour is driven by two primary factors, nature and nurture, nature being all of one's biology and nurture being all of one's life experiences. To complicate matters further, nature and nurture interact and influence each other, creating untold and unpredictable behavioural outcomes.

"Almost all the research that indicates genetic or biological influences on criminal behaviour also shows strong environmental components."

Dr. Gail S. Anderson, "Biological Influences on Criminal Behaviour"

And all of this is *cumulative*; what we do or say at any given moment must be, and can only be, the direct result of our biology and life experiences, *right up to the moment of enacting a behaviour*.

Here is a pictorial of the process:



This is a hopeful picture because it holds out the promise of us being able to develop better, more pro-social behaviour going forward through exposure to:

1. **Better life experiences.** For example, being exposed to teachings on mindfulness, compassion, and civility. This assumes, of course, that we happen to be among the lucky ones blessed with sufficient self-awareness, interest, inclination, opportunities, and intelligence to be able to take advantage of life's more edifying experiences. Unfortunately, as we all know, not everyone is so lucky (*and through no fault of their own; they've simply been dealt a bum hand by life*).

2. **New life experiences.** For example, having one's car impounded for stunt driving has at least the potential to dissuade future recurrence (again, assuming the individual is influenceable - not all are so lucky; once again, through no fault of their own). So, experiencing the consequences of our behaviour *may* influence future behaviour. As covered later, however, it's HOW such consequences are delivered to the offender that hold out the promise of a kinder, more enlightened society.

You Should Have Known Better!

We typically treat people who do stupid things as if they are actually stupid, as if the thought of doing the right thing never even occurred to them.

But almost assuredly it did, even if subconsciously. Unfortunately, their brain weighed up the pros and cons based on their biology and past experiences and, in the case of a bad decision, the good rationale simply got outvoted by the bad rationale.

The result? An ill-judged behaviour - but *not* through choice (again, because we can't, and don't, control our brain's biochemical workings - it is a physical impossibility).

"Many people on the wrong side of the law generally know the difference between right and wrong actions, and they understand the threat of the punishment - but they are hamstrung by poor impulse control."

Dr. David Eagleman, "The Brain - the Story of You"

Here's how I picture what goes on in our brain when a behavioural decision is made, this imagining a teenage boy's brain weighing up the factors behind whether to drink and drive:

<u>Mature Rationale</u>	<u>Weighting</u>	<u>Immature Rationale</u>	<u>Weighting</u>
✓ Drunk driving is dangerous	3	✗ I likely won't get caught	4
✓ My parents will be angry	5	✗ It's fun to drink with friends	3
✓ I could lose my licence	2	✗ The girls will think I'm cool	6
	<hr/>		<hr/>
TOTALS	10		13

DECISION?: Drink and drive

Yes, some part of his brain certainly knew that drunk driving is wrong. However, given the state of his biology *at that very moment* (perhaps under the influence of temporarily-diminished impulse control caused by poor sleep) as well as the cumulative impact of all his life experiences *right up to that very second* (perhaps influenced by the fact that his dad periodically drinks and drives), ***no other decision by him (i.e. by his brain) could have been made.***

"The next choice you make will come out of the darkness of prior causes that you, the conscious witness of your experience, did not bring into being."

"What does it mean to say that rapists and murderers commit their crimes of their own free will? If this statement means anything, it must be that they could have behaved differently - with the universe, including their brains, in precisely the same state it was in at the moment they committed their crimes.

Assuming that violent criminals have such freedom, we reflexively blame them for their actions. But without it, the place for our blame suddenly vanishes, and even the most terrifying sociopaths begin to seem like victims themselves. The moment we catch sight of the stream of causes that precede their conscious decisions, reaching back into childhood and beyond, their culpability begins to disappear."

Sam Harris, "Free Will"

We're All Just Doing the Best we Can

So, with blame shown to have zero justification, does this mean we just ignore bad behaviour?

Of course not. If something is ***truly*** important (and not just an affront to our personal preferences or delicate ego), then steps should be taken to prevent future harm and hopefully influence the offender to behave better *next time*.

But the key difference is in HOW we intervene. Gone forever should be our habitual anger, animosity, judging, and blame. These not only inflame a situation but, more to the point, ***are simply unjustifiable and incompatible with science.***

In their place, ***now full in the knowledge that we're each just doing the best we can at each and every moment given the biological/experiential hand we've been dealt,*** we substitute caring, compassion, understanding, and human kindness.

Surely this is a better way forward for this hurting world of ours.

Warmest regards,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Pertinent Quotes from Learned Individuals

Dr. David Eagleman - "[The Brain - the Story of You](#)"

"Everything you've experienced has altered the physical structure of your brain. These indelible, microscopic impressions accumulate to make you who you are, and to constrain who you can become."

"Simple acts are underpinned by a massive labor force of neurons. You remain blissfully unaware of all their activity, but your life is shaped and coloured by what's happening under the hood: how you act, what matters to you, your reactions, your loves and desires, what you believe to be true and false. Your experience is the final output of these hidden networks. So, who exactly is steering the ship?"

"The conscious you is only the smallest part of the activity of your brain. Your actions, your beliefs, and your biases are all driven by networks in your brain to which you have no conscious access."

"Because the conscious mind has low bandwidth, you don't typically have full access to the bodily signals that tip your decisions; most of the action in your body lives far below your awareness."

Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, "[7 1/2 Lessons About the Brain](#)"

"Yes, your brain is wired to initiate your actions before you're aware of them. That is kind of a big deal. After all, in everyday life, you do many things by choice, right? At least it seems that way. But the brain is a predicting organ. It launches your next set of actions based on your past experience and current situation, and it does so outside of your awareness. In other words, your actions are under the control of your memory and your environment."

"Everything you learn today seeds your brain to predict differently tomorrow."

Kenan Malik, "[The Quest for a Moral Compass - A Global History of Ethics](#)"

"Without free will there could be no moral judgment."

"The very idea of morality relies on viewing humans not as machines but as conscious agents capable of making choices and taking responsibility for their actions. This conflict between scientific mechanism and human exceptionalism has haunted thinking about the human condition from Descartes' day to ours."

"Knowledge is liberating because the more we know about ourselves and about the human condition, the more we are able to recognize that we love or hate or find joy or feel pain, not of free choice, but of chance and history and accidental association and past conditioning. Once we realize that, we can stop blaming others for their actions, for these are absolutely determined. We can stop blaming ourselves, too, for our actions are also equally determined. Hate, envy, and guilt vanish."

Sam Harris, "[Free Will](#)"

"How can we be 'free' as conscious agents if everything that we consciously intend is caused by events in our brain that we do not intend and of which we are entirely unaware? We can't."

"Willpower is itself a biological phenomenon. You can change your life, and yourself, through effort and discipline - but you have whatever capacity for effort and discipline you have in this moment, and not a scintilla more (or less). You are either lucky in this department or you aren't - and you cannot make your own luck."

"Choices, efforts, intentions, and reasoning influence our behaviour - but they are themselves part of a chain of causes that precede conscious awareness and over which we exert no ultimate control."

"Our system of justice should reflect an understanding that any of us could have been dealt a very different hand in life. In fact, it seems immoral not to recognize just how much luck is involved in morality itself."

"The urge for retribution depends upon our not seeing the underlying causes of human behaviour."

"Why did I order beer instead of wine? Because I prefer beer. Why do I prefer it? I don't know. Whatever the reason, I prefer one taste to the other. Is there freedom in this? None whatsoever. Would I magically reclaim my freedom if I decided to spite my preference and order wine instead? No, because the roots of this intention would be as obscure as the preference itself."

[Dr. Marvin Minsky](#)

"None of us enjoys the thought that what we do depends on processes we do not know; we prefer to attribute our choices to volition, will, or self-control Perhaps it would be more honest to say, 'My decision was determined by internal forces I do not understand' "

Dr. Daniel Wegner, "[The Illusion of Conscious Will](#)"

"Detailed analytical studies of the timing of action indicate that conscious will does not precede brain events leading to spontaneous voluntary action but, rather, follows them."

"The unique human convenience of conscious thoughts that preview our actions gives us the privilege of feeling we willfully cause what we do. In fact, however, unconscious and inscrutable mechanisms create both conscious thought about action and the action, and also produce the sense of will we experience by perceiving the thought as cause of the action."

"In all these examples of perceived control, the perception of control is not the same thing as actual control. The point we have rehearsed to exhaustion throughout this book - that the feeling of will is not the same as the force of will - arises again here."

"Conscious will is strongly linked to responsibility and morality. As the logic goes, a person is morally responsible only for actions that are consciously willed. Thus, the idea that conscious will might be no more than an illusion stirs up a torrent of moral worries; if conscious will is illusory, how can we continue to hold people responsible for what they do? How can we reward people for good acts if there is no doing things on purpose?"

"We experience willing a walk in the park, winding a clock, or smiling at someone, and the feeling keeps our notion of ourselves as persons intact. Our sense of being a conscious agent who does things comes at a cost of being technically wrong all the time. The feeling of doing is how it seems, not what it is - but that is as it should be. All is well, because the illusion makes us human."

[Albert Einstein](#)

"If the moon, in the act of completing its eternal way around the earth, were gifted with self-consciousness, it would feel thoroughly convinced that it was traveling its way of its own accord. So would a Being, endowed with higher insight and more perfect intelligence, watching man and his doings, smile about man's illusion that he was acting according to his own free will."

Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, "[How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain](#)"

"Trapped within the skull, with only past experiences as a guide, your brain makes predictions. These neural conversations try to anticipate every fragment of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste that you will experience, and every action you will take. These predictions are your brain's best guesses of what's going on in the world around you, and how to deal with it to keep you alive and well. And right now, with each word you read, your brain is predicting what the next word will be, based on probabilities from your lifetime of reading experience. In short, your experience right now was predicted by your brain a moment ago."

"Your brain also uses prediction to initiate your body's movements. These predictions occur before you have any conscious awareness or intent about moving your body. Neuroscientists and psychologists call this phenomenon 'the illusion of free will'."

"You might think that your perceptions of the world are driven by events in the world, but really, they are anchored in your (*brain's*) predictions, which are then tested (*by your brain*) against incoming sensory input."

"The stimulus-response brain is a myth; brain activity is prediction and correction, and we construct emotional experiences outside of awareness. This explanation fits the architecture and operation of the brain."

"Your cascade of predictions explains why an experience like happiness feels triggered rather than constructed. Your brain is preparing to execute movements in your face and body before you feel any sense of agency for moving, and is predicting your sensory input before it arrives. So emotions seem to be 'happening to' you when, in fact, your brain is actively constructing the experience ..."

"Are you responsible for your actions? Yes, says the essentialist view of human nature. Are other people responsible for your actions? No, you are an individual with free will. These assumptions, born of essentialism, are baked into the law, driving verdicts of guilt and innocence, even as neuroscience has been quietly debunking them as myths."

"Your brain's control network is always engaged, actively selecting your actions; you just don't always feel in control. In other words, your experience of being in control is just that - an experience."

Dr. Douglas Hofstadter - "[I Am a Strange Loop](#)"

"The pressures of daily life require us, force us, to talk about events at the level on which we directly perceive them. Access at that level is what our sensory organs, our language, and our culture provide us with. From earliest childhood on we are handed concepts such as 'milk', 'finger', 'wall' We perceive the world in terms of such notions, not in terms of microscopic notions like 'ribosome', 'peptide bond', or 'carbon atom'. In sum then, we are victims of our macroscopicness, and cannot escape from the trap of using everyday words to describe the events that we witness, and perceive as real.

This is why it is much more natural for us to try to imagine a war as triggered for religious or economic reasons than to try to imagine a war as a vast pattern of interacting elementary particles and to think of what triggered it in similar terms - even though physicists may insist that that is the only 'true' level of explanation for it."

"I don't know what it would feel like if my will were free. What on earth would that mean? That I didn't follow my will sometimes? Thus, I might choose not to take a second helping of noodles even though I - or rather part of me - would still like some, because there's another part of me that wants me not to gain weight, and the weight-watching part happens (this evening) to have more votes than the gluttonous part does. If it didn't, then it would lose and my inner glutton would win, and that would be fine - but either way, my non-free will would win out and I'd follow the dominant desire of my brain.

Yes, certainly, I'll make a decision, and I'll do so by conducting a kind of inner vote. The count of votes will yield a result, and by George, one side will come out the winner. But where's any 'freeness' in all this?"

Dr. Michael Gazzaniga - "[The Mind's Past](#)"

"With our brains chock full of marvelous devices, you would think that they do their duties automatically, before we are truly aware of the acts. This is precisely what happens."

"Our motor system, which makes operational our brain's decisions about the world, is independent of our conscious perceptions. Too often our perceptions are in error; so it could be disastrous to have our lives depend on them. We would be better off if our brains reacted to real sensory truths, not illusory ones."

"By the time we think we know something (i.e. it is part of our conscious experience), the brain has already done its work. It is old news to the brain, but fresh to 'us'. Systems built into the brain do their work automatically and largely outside of our conscious awareness.

We are clueless about how all this works and gets effected. We don't plan or articulate these actions. We simply observe the output."

"Our conscious lives depend on all kinds of automatic processes happening inside our brains. Though we can't influence them by willed action, we continue to believe that we are in control of what we do."

"When animals' fixed behaviours are revealed as automatic and built in, no one blinks at that. People get nervous, though, when the same sort of arrangement is suggested for human perceptual and cognitive functions."

"Brain imaging techniques allow us to see how and where the brain is active before a behaviour is actually executed. The decision has already been made when our conscious self catches up with these activities and declares we have made a decision."

"Our brains are automatic because physical tissue carries out what we do. How could it be any other way? The brain does it before our conceptual self knows about it."

"The interpretation of things past liberates us from the sense of being tied to the demands of the environment and produces the wonderful sensation that our self is in charge of our destiny."

Dr. Timothy Wilson, "[Strangers to Ourselves - Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious](#)"

"Consider that at any given moment, our five senses are taking in more than 11 million pieces of information. The most liberal estimate is that people can process consciously about 40 pieces of information per second. It would be terribly wasteful to design a system with such incredible sensory acuity but very little capacity to use the incoming information. Fortunately, we do make use of a great deal of the information, outside of conscious awareness."

"[John Bargh](#) and [Peter Gollwitzer](#) and their colleagues argue that events in the environment can trigger goals and direct our behaviour completely outside of conscious awareness. Just as other kinds of thinking can become habitual, automatic, and non-conscious, so can the selection of goals."

"[Wegner](#) and [Wheatley's](#) provocative theory illustrates that a sense of conscious will cannot be taken as evidence that conscious thoughts really did cause our behaviour. The causal role of conscious thought has been vastly overrated; instead, it is often a post-hoc explanation of responses that emanated from the adaptive unconscious."

Dr. Joshua Greene & Dr. Jonathan Cohen, "[For the law, neuroscience changes nothing and everything](#)"

"Intuitively, we want to punish those people who truly deserve it, but whenever the causes of someone's behaviour are made sufficiently vivid, we no longer see that person as truly deserving of punishment. This insight is expressed by the old French proverb: 'to know all, is to forgive all'. It is also expressed in the teachings of religious figures, such as Jesus and Buddha, who preach a message of universal compassion. Neuroscience can make this message more compelling by vividly illustrating the mechanical nature of human action."

Dr. Robert Sapolsky, "[Behave - The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst](#)"

"A behaviour has occurred; what happened in everything from a second to a million years earlier that helps explain why it happened? Some themes have come up repeatedly:

- To understand things, you must incorporate neurons *and* hormones *and* early development *and* genes, etc., etc.
- These aren't separate categories - there are few clear-cut causal agents, so don't count on there being *the* brain region, *the* neurotransmitter, *the* gene, *the* cultural influence, or *the* single anything that explains a behaviour.
- Instead of causes, biology is repeatedly about propensities, potentials, vulnerabilities, predispositions, proclivities, interactions, modulations, contingencies, ...
- No one said this was easy. But the subject matters."

"Is resisting temptation at every turn an outcome of 'will', or is it an act of 'grace', where there's no struggle, because it's simple; you don't cheat?"

(The research found that) it was grace. In those who were always honest, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, and anterior cingulate cortex were in veritable comas when the chance to cheat arose. There's no conflict. There's no working hard to do the right thing. You simply don't cheat."

"People intuitively believe in free will, not just because we have this terrible human need for agency but also because most people know next to nothing about those internal forces. And even the neuroscientist on the witness stand can't accurately predict which individual with extensive frontal damage will become the serial murderer, because science as a whole still knows about only a handful of those internal forces. Shattered bone *leads to* inflammation *leads to* constricted movement is easy. Neurotransmitters + hormones + childhood + ____ + ____ + isn't."

"Perhaps the loss of freedom that occurs when a dangerous person is removed from society must be deterrence enough. Perhaps some conventional punishment will still be needed if it is sufficiently deterring. But what must be abolished are the views that punishment can be deserved and that punishing can be virtuous."

"The hope is that when it comes to dealing with humans whose behaviours are among our worst and most damaging, words like 'evil' and 'soul' will be as irrelevant as when considering a car with faulty brakes.

When a car is being dysfunctional and dangerous, we take it to a mechanic. This is not a dualistic situation where, (a) if the mechanic discovers some broken widget causing the problem, we have a mechanistic explanation but, (b) if the mechanic can't find anything wrong, we're dealing with an evil car.

Many who are viscerally opposed to this view charge that it is dehumanizing to frame damaged humans as broken machines. But as a final, crucial point, doing that is a hell of a lot more humane than demonizing and sermonizing them as sinners."

"If we deny free will when it comes to the worst of our behaviours, the same must also apply to the best. To our talents, displays of willpower and focus, moments of bursting creativity, decency, and compassion. Logically it should seem as ludicrous to take credit for those traits as to respond to a compliment on the beauty of your cheekbones ..."

Dr. David Eagleman, "[Incognito - The Secret Lives of the Brain](#)"

"When your biology changes, so can your decision making, your appetites, and your desires. The drives you take for granted ... depend on the intricate details of your neural machinery. Although acting on such drives is popularly thought to be a free choice, the most cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates the limits of that assumption."

"Although our decisions may seem like free choices, no good evidence exists that they actually are."

"The crux of the question is whether *all* of your actions are fundamentally on autopilot or whether there is some little bit that is 'free' to choose, independent of the rules of biology.

As far as we can tell, all activity in the brain is driven by other activity in the brain. For better or worse, this seems to leave no room for anything *other than* neural activity.

If free will is to have any effect on the actions of the body, it needs to influence the ongoing brain activity. And to do that, it needs to be physically connected to at least some of the neurons. But we don't find any spot in the brain that is not itself driven by other parts of the network. Instead, every part of the brain is densely interconnected with - and driven by - other brain parts. And that suggests that no part is independent and, therefore, 'free'."

"Given the steering power of our genetics, childhood experiences, environmental toxins, hormones, neurotransmitters, and neural circuitry, enough of our decisions are beyond our explicit control that we are arguably not the ones in charge. In other words, free will *may* exist - but if it does, it has very little room in which to operate.

... free will, if it exists, is only a small factor riding on top of enormous automated machinery. So small that we may be able to think about bad decision making in the same way we think about any other physical process, such as diabetes or lung disease."

"The more we discover about the circuitry of the brain, the more the answers tip away from accusations of indulgence, lack of motivation, and poor discipline - and move toward the details of the biology. The shift from blame to science reflects our modern understanding that our perceptions and behaviours are controlled by inaccessible subroutines that are easily perturbed."

"... if there is a measurable brain problem, that buys leniency for the defendant. He's not really to blame. But we do blame someone if we lack the technology to detect a biological problem. And this gets us to the heart of our argument: that blameworthiness is the wrong question to ask."

"We may someday find that certain types of bad behaviour will have a meaningful biological explanation - as has happened with schizophrenia, epilepsy, depression, and mania. A just legal system cannot define culpability simply by the limitations of current technology."

"The bottom line of the argument is that criminals should always be treated as incapable of having acted otherwise. The criminal activity itself should be taken as evidence of brain abnormality."

"Now, there's a critical nuance to appreciate here. Not everyone with a brain tumor undertakes a mass shooting, and not all males commit crimes. Why not? As we will see in the next chapter, it is because genes and environment interact in unimaginably complex patterns. As a result, human behaviour will always remain unpredictable."

"Because of inaccessible fluctuations in our biological soup, some days we find ourselves more irritable, humorous, well spoken, calm, energized, or clear-thinking. Our internal life and external actions are steered by biological cocktails to which we have neither immediate access nor direct acquaintance."

"The critical take-home lesson is that invisibly small changes inside the brain can cause massive changes to behaviour. Our choices are inseparably married to the tiniest details of our machinery."

"Given these facts on the ground, it is far from clear that we hold the option of 'choosing' who we would like to be."

"These examples demonstrate that it is neither biology alone nor environment alone that determines the final product of a personality. When it comes to the nature versus nurture question, the answer almost always includes both.

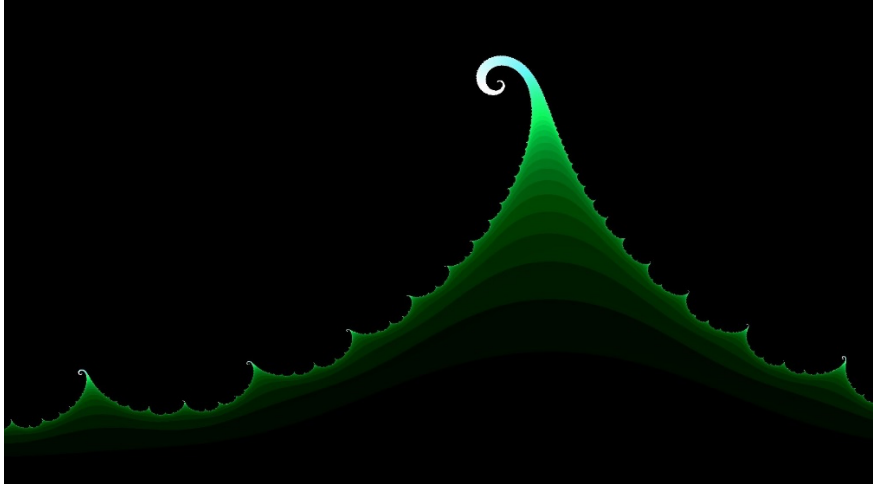
This is the reason people come to the table with quite different ways of seeing the world, dissimilar personalities, and varied capacities for decision making."

Warmest regards,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

"It's important to remember we always do the best we can with the information, skills, and resources we have available at the time."

Mark Coleman, author of ["Make Peace With Your Mind"](#)



Chapter 26: DIFFERENT DRUMMERS

" If you feel compelled to change me, then you don't truly like me. So please take my leave so I may rest in the company of those who do."

Anonymous

Please Don't Tell Me How I Ought to Be

No doubt we've each felt the sting of disapproval for doing nothing more than simply being who we are. Does *anyone* take kindly to unsolicited guidance about how they *ought* to be?

No, of course not. Because if acceptance is contingent, then it's not acceptance at all; it's actually a *rejection of who we are as a person*.

Citing my own experience, over the years it's been variously suggested to me by well-meaning individuals that I should be, among other things, more talkative, more emotive, more affectionate, more spontaneous, and more sociable.

But here's the thing. They may as well have suggested that I be taller, because I can't do that either!

In truth, I am none of those things. Nor have I ever felt the slightest desire, or need, to be so.

Simply put, they are not who I am, this a personality forged by my unique combination of biology, environment, and life experiences, the very same factors that forge *everyone's* unique personality.

"... the three things I cannot change are the past, the truth, and you."

Anne Lamott, American writer

Change is an Inside Job

So, change has to come from within, not from without.

This is why it's so futile (and more than a little maddening!) that we humans so oft times feel compelled to try to change each other into our own image.

At the end of the day, what we all yearn for is simply to be accepted for who we are - warts and all.

In this regard, I'll leave you to ponder these words from the late psychologist, [Dr. David Kiersey](#):

If you do not want what I want, please try not to tell me that my want is wrong.

Or if my beliefs are different from yours, at least pause before you set out to correct them.

Or if my emotion seems less or more intense than yours, given the same circumstances, try not to ask me to feel other than I do.

Or if I act, or fail to act, in the manner of your design for action, please let me be.

I do not, for the moment at least, ask you to understand me. That will come only when you are willing to give up trying to change me into a copy of you.

If you will allow me any of my own wants, or emotions, or beliefs, or actions, then you open yourself to the possibility that someday these ways of mine might not seem so wrong, and might finally appear as right - for me.

To put up with me is the first step to understanding me. Not that you embrace my ways as right for you, but that you are no longer irritated or disappointed with me for my seeming waywardness.

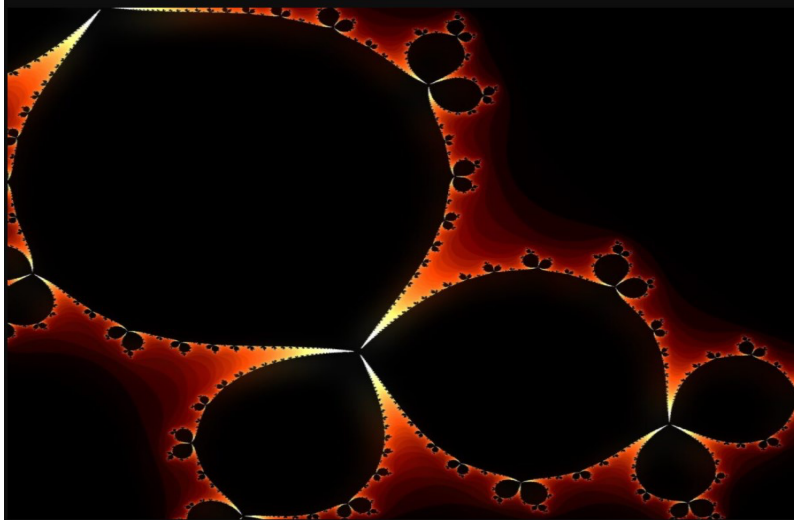
And one day, perhaps, in trying to understand me, you might come to prize my differences and, far from seeking to change me, might preserve and even cherish those differences.

I may be your spouse, your parent, your offspring, your friend, your colleague. But whatever our relation, this I know: You and I are fundamentally different, and both of us have to march to our own drummer.

From Dr. Kiersey's book, "[Please Understand Me](#)"

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 27: MANIFESTING A NEW WORLD

"To understand all, is to forgive all."

Evelyn Waugh, from his novel, "Brideshead Revisited"

As far as it goes, this is certainly a lovely sentiment to live by; to assume that we *never* have all the facts and so forgive those who trespass against us as a routine matter of course.

But I believe we need to go even further.

In fact, it strikes me that to understand all - to understand fully the causes behind each act of human behaviour - actually **renders the very concept of forgiveness unnecessary; non-sensical even - because in knowing all, it suddenly dawns on us that there's never anything to forgive; that we are always, and at all times, blameless.**

But how can this possibly be? Simply put, it's because blame and forgiveness mistakenly assume behavioural *choice*; that the transgressor could have behaved better, *but chose not to*.

But, as we've seen in previous posts, this take on life is *simply incorrect*.

In short, belief in behavioural choice is *not* a tenable position because *it is incompatible with science* (see these posts: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) or Appendix A for the Coles Notes version).

But this aside, and to get to my main point, ***it is this mistaken belief in behavioural choice that is the primary obstacle to our manifesting a new, and better, world for us all.***

A New World

This post posits the manifestation of a new world, one rooted in compassion, respect, understanding, and goodwill toward *all*, without exception.

Such a world stands in stark contrast to our own where finding fault with each other is a global pastime and unquestioned norm, just the way things are.

But this "normal" is what lies at the heart of so much misguided anger, division, conflict, and petty drama.

The hope-filled world I will outline lies within our individual (and, therefore, collective) grasp - it's not a pipe dream - because I now reside there.

"To bring peace to the Earth, strive to make your own life peaceful."

Anonymous

And its manifestation rests on but one thing; the wholehearted embrace of this simple understanding:

At each and every moment, we are all simply doing the best we can.

How freeing this is!

Blame, anger, and their resulting psychological turmoil simply fall away.

And in their place we begin to experience an ease of being rooted in a new understanding, a new appreciation, that everyone we encounter - *everyone* - is just like us, fellow beings going about their day in search of security and happiness and doing so ***to the very best of their ability given the hand life has dealt them***. And because we don't get to choose that hand, each and every one of us is always, and at all times, ***blameless***.

"It's important to remember that we always do the best we can with the information, skills, and resources we have available at the time."

Mark Coleman, author of "[Make Peace With Your Mind](#)"

Outlines of a New World

In a world where behavioural choice is finally seen for what it truly is - *factually incorrect* - we begin to appreciate that much of what we currently accept as normal human interaction (albeit, dysfunctional) is simply *nonsense* and no longer justifiable.

Here are some of the ways this new world differs markedly from what we have come to accept as 'normal':

- In this new world, **we no longer get angry with others or hold a grudge**. In a blameless world, there's nothing to get angry over; we acknowledge the innocence in us all.
- **We cease taking things personally**. It's never about us, even if directed at us. What it is about is simply how the other person perceives the world through their own unique filters (biological, environmental, and experiential), and their perspective is just as valid as our own, just different.
- **We stop finding fault with others' behaviour**. In a [deterministic](#) universe, 'fault' has no meaning and no rationale.
- **Demanding an apology ceases to make any sense** because we're all just doing the best we can and did not cause harm through willed choice.
- **The concept of forgiveness is rendered meaningless**, because there is nothing to forgive.
- **Saying "I'm sorry" becomes meaningless and redundant** in a blameless world because it's completely understood that you didn't inflict harm through willed choice.
- **'Regret' and 'shame' are dropped from the lexicon**. While we may feel badly that we've caused harm to another, we acknowledge our innocence and hope we do better *next time* (but, in a deterministic universe, *this time* could not have been different). And, for some, it's not even assured they *can* do better next time because that depends entirely on the behavioural hand they've been dealt by life. Some unlucky individuals simply do not possess the ability to do better - *and that's not their fault*.
- **We cease to label others in derogatory terms for their behaviour and, most importantly, cease to feel any animosity towards them**.
- **Asking the question, 'Why?' with respect to someone else's behaviour becomes an invalid question to ask**, both because the individual is blameless and because, while they may fashion an answer of sorts, in reality *they don't have the slightest clue* because the myriad factors driving behaviour lie well beyond - indeed, infinitely beyond - human comprehension.

Now, I fully acknowledge that such responses are deeply-held cultural norms, many of which, such as "I'm sorry" or "regret", serve the useful purpose of smoothing over ruffled relationships.

But this is due entirely to our collective ignorance; our tragically-mistaken belief that people do bad things on purpose, through willed choice, and therefore deserve to be judged, found wanting, and punished.

But this belief is simply wrong, and even a cursory examination of the science of behaviour shows this to be the case.

And as we've covered in previous posts, this doesn't mean that bad behaviour is tolerated, it simply means that the person exhibiting it is treated at all times with compassion, understanding, and respect, this being a far cry from the intolerance, anger, and retribution meted out by our current state of ignorance.

My Personal Experience With This New World

This phrase has become my mantra:

At each and every moment, we are all simply doing the best we can.

And what has this done for me?

Well, first off, let me say that in this new world there most definitely remains a copious supply of what I would have formerly referred to as "selfish, self-centred, inconsiderate, mindless boneheads". 😊

But, these days, I immediately catch myself judging them and, rather than getting upset and ruining my day, I smile at my habitual reaction and just remind myself that they're simply doing the best they can.

Sure, it's boneheaded, but it's the best they could muster, it's nothing personal, and it's certainly nothing to get all worked up over.

I now know, in my head and in my heart, that if they could have done better, they would have, *but they simply couldn't*; it was the very best they could do at that moment given the impersonal cumulative impact of their biology, environment, and life experiences.

In choosing* to see the world this way, I retain my peace of mind and experience a relaxed, unperturbed ease of being regardless of external circumstances, a state of mind the former version of myself would have found inconceivable - delusional even.

The good news is that such a world lies most definitely within our grasp. If I can choose to reside here, so can you. And all it takes is adopting a new understanding of human behaviour, one that, unlike our current understanding, is actually compatible with science.

Which World do We Wish to Live In?

So, time for us all to ask ourselves, which world do we wish to live in? The one we occupy now, the one wracked by non-sensical blame, anger, judgment, and retribution, or one rooted in compassion, understanding, and respect?

And even if your interpretation of the science underpinning this new world differs from my own, ***what exactly is the downside to adopting it anyway?*** None that I can think of.

So, welcome to the neighborhood!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

** If you have read my posts on [Free Will](#) and [Blame](#), you will know that whenever I use the word "choosing", I don't mean willful choice but, rather, the unconscious capacity of our brain to be influenced by new life experiences. Such an experience could be something as simple as reading an essay on "learning how to achieve peace of mind through a scientific understanding of human behaviour", just to cite one decidedly pertinent example!*

Appendix A: *The Drivers of Human Behaviour*

In this post I have asserted that the root cause of all the blame, anger, division, and conflict in the world, both today and since time immemorial, is due entirely to our innocent misunderstanding of what actually drives human behaviour.

In short, belief in willed choice is not a tenable position to take, because it is incompatible with science:

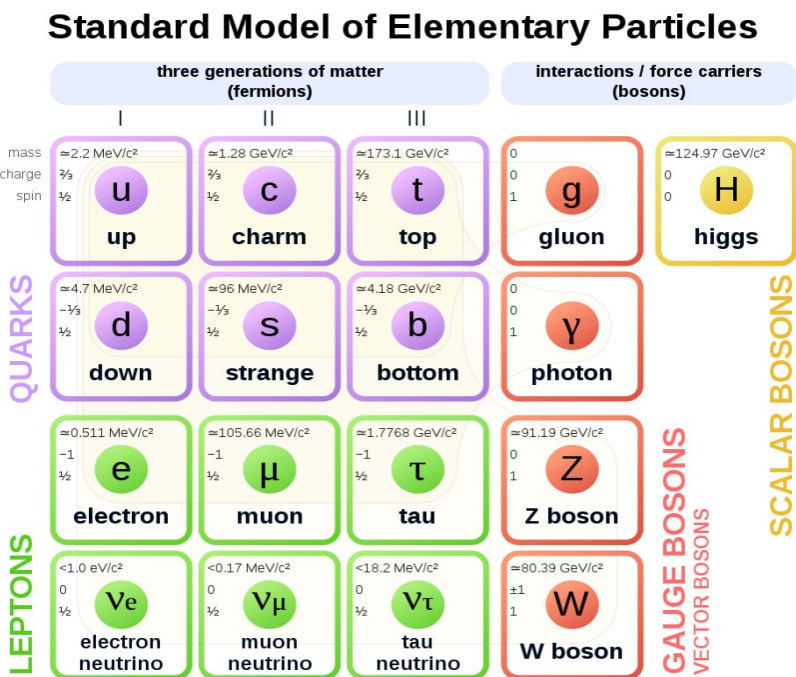
The Physics of Behaviour: The world of physical matter

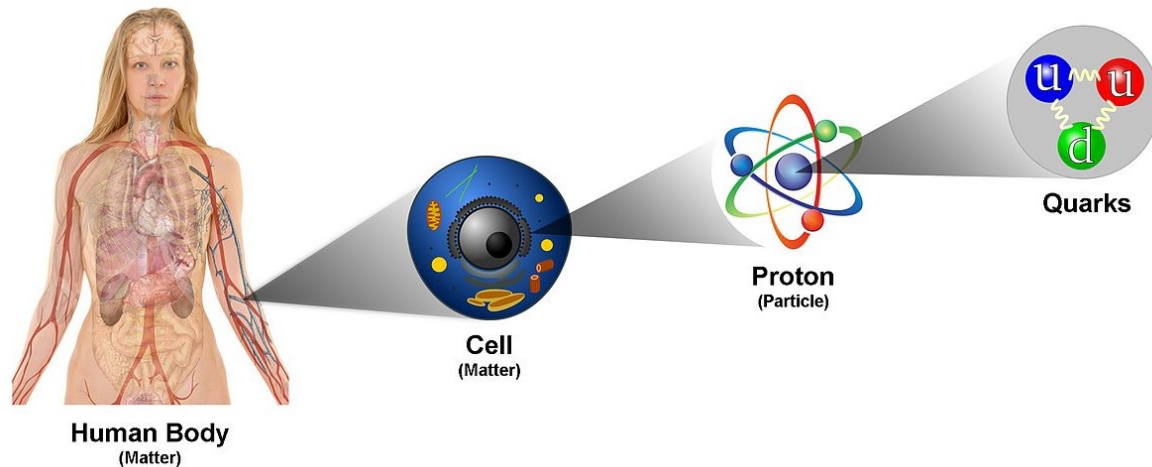
Our universe (of which we are obviously a part) is simply a collection of sub-atomic particles - electrons, neutrinos, photons, etc. - all answering to one authority; the cold, hard laws of physics.

What these particles are permitted to do at any given moment is completely described and circumscribed by the laws of [Newtonian](#) and [quantum](#) physics.

"You give me a quantum state of a system, and there are unambiguous equations that will tell me what it will do next."

Dr. Sean Carroll, theoretical physicist and author of "The Big Picture"





It is at this level, the sub-atomic level – *a level with which we have no acquaintance and over which we have no control* – **where all the behavioural action actually takes place**. How could it be anything but?

Simply put, we're made of matter - quarks, leptons, bosons - and matter answers to the laws of physics, not to metaphysical mind stuff.

By default, it follows that the human brain also answers to this cold reality. There is no room for consciously-willed human intervention here. The feeling of free will is just that - how it *feels* - not how it *actually is*.

"We need to set aside the notion that our choices and decisions and actions have their ultimate origin within each of us, that they emerge from deliberations that stand beyond the reach of physical law. We need to recognize that although the sensation of free will is real, the capacity to exert free will - the capacity for the human mind to transcend the laws that control physical progression - is not."

Brian Greene - theoretical physicist and author of "[Until the End of Time](#)"

"Nobody ever would have figured out how nature works at small distances based purely on everyday experience. To human beings, whose direct observations are confined to the "big things", the quantum theory is ridiculously counterintuitive. But in the twenty-first century it underpins so much of our modern lives, from medical imaging to the latest computing technologies, that we must accept it whether we feel comfortable about it or not."

Brian Cox – physicist and author of "[Why does \$E = mc^2\$?](#)"

In a universe answerable only to the cold, hard laws of physics, we are all *blameless*. As such, what we each deserve at each and every turn in life can only be this - compassion, understanding, and respect.

The Biology of Behaviour: The world of organic matter

As documented in [Chapter 22](#), human behaviour is influenced by innumerable biological factors - genes, hormone levels, neuronal health, gut flora, epigenetic effects - the full scope of which has only begun to be studied and still remains only poorly understood.

And just to complicate matters further, the expression of these biological factors is influenced by both our environment and by our life experiences.

This is why asking the question, "*Why did you do that?*", is simply not a valid question to ask, because it is *unanswerable* - human behaviour is far too complex to have a simple, pat answer.

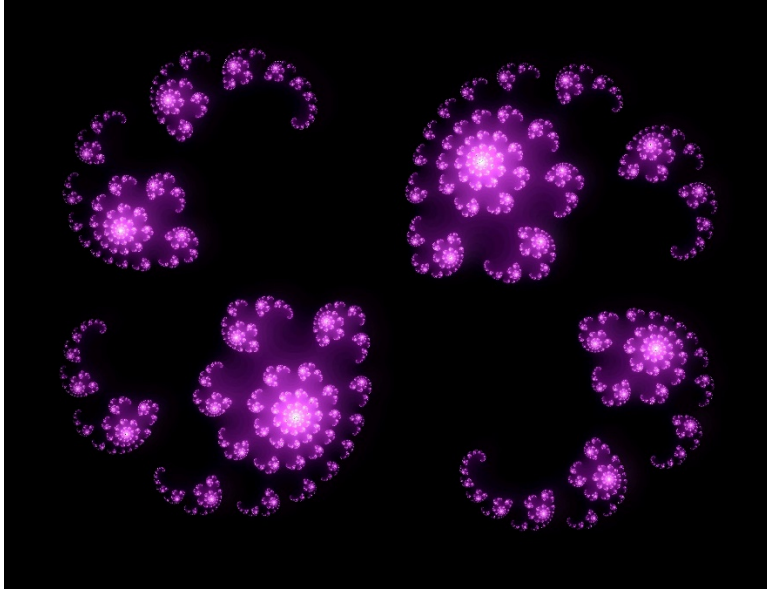
But here is the main point: ***we don't get to choose these factors, we cannot control these factors, and their impact on who we are and how we behave occurs outside of our conscious awareness.***

Indeed, mess with any of these factors and 'you' cease to be 'you'.

Given such utter lack of control over how these factors impact behaviour, how fair is it to sit in judgment of each other? Quite obviously, *it's not*.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



Chapter 28: IDIOT COMPASSION

“... trying to smooth everything over to avoid confrontation is not what’s meant by compassion or patience. It’s what’s meant by control.”

Pema Chodron, Buddhist nun and prolific writer and teacher of Buddhist philosophy

Q: *Your posts have repeatedly emphasized the importance of always behaving in a manner that brings peace into the world rather than aggression, and I agree wholeheartedly with you. I truly believe that individual acts of kindness and respect, toward everyone we meet, send out tiny ripples of peace, positively impacting the world in a myriad of ways we will never know.*

But, because of this, I really struggle when it comes to knowing how to deal with individuals whom I personally find unpleasant. If we're always to show compassion, understanding, and respect, does this mean it's wrong to cut annoying people out of our life?

A: Of course not. We definitely do *not* have to pal around with those who display a *pattern of behaviour* that we find unpleasant. To feel compelled to endure such individuals is referred to as "*idiot compassion*"; the mistaken belief that being compassionate means to tolerate all manner of behaviour. We definitely do not have to do so.

But, in a world where everyone is simply doing the best they can, we don't use pejorative terms like "annoying".

Instead, we simply acknowledge that this particular individual is just not our cup of tea; *nothing personal and no reason for animosity*. Almost assuredly they're someone else's cup of tea, just not ours.

So, we simply part ways amicably. Well, at least we part ways amicably. It is completely unrealistic to think that we can stage-manage how the other person is going to react. We can't, and shouldn't even try, because attempting to do so risks coming across as condescending and disingenuous. Needless to say, this risks making a necessary parting of ways even more unpleasant than it otherwise may have been.

And three final points:

- Because we are each a mix of personality traits, referring to someone as "*annoying*", unfairly overlooks and discounts their positive traits.
- The phrase "*pattern of behaviour*" is important here. After all, we each have bad days when we behave in a manner unrepresentative of who we really are. So, it's only when we experience *repeated* unpleasant behaviour that it's fair to ask ourselves whether we desire that person's company going forward.
- Because patterns of behaviour can change over time (due to changing biology, environment, and life experiences), a second chance down the road *may* be worth considering.

"In the final analysis, is my life better or worse with this person in my life?"

Anonymous

I will leave the final words on this important issue to one of my favourite teachers of Buddhist wisdom, Pema Chodron:

Question to Pema:

"How do you differentiate the feeling of compassion and the need to remove yourself from a damaging situation?"

Pema's response:

"It's not the compassionate thing to keep allowing someone to keep being able to feed their violence and their aggression. So, of course, they're going to freak out and be extremely upset. And it will be quite difficult for you to go through the process of actually leaving the situation."

But that's the compassionate thing to do.

It's the compassionate thing to do for yourself, because you are part of that dynamic, and, before, you always stayed. So now, you're going to do something frightening, groundless, and quite different. But it's the compassionate thing to do for yourself, rather than stay in a demeaning, destructive, abusive relationship.

And it's the most compassionate thing you can do for them too.

They will certainly not thank you for it, and they will certainly not be glad. They'll go through a lot. But if there's any chance for them to wake up or start to work on their side of the problem, their abusive behaviour or whatever it might be, it's up to you to actually draw the line and get out of there.

We all know stories of people who had to hit that kind of bottom, where the people that they loved stopped giving them the wrong kind of compassion and just walked out. Then, sometimes, that wakes a person up, and they start to do what they need to do."

Excerpted from an interview with Pema Chodron by Shambhala International

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

***"You can please *some* of the people *all* of the time.
You can please *all* of the people *some* of the time.
But you can't please *all* of the people *all* of the time."***

John Lydgate, British monk (1370 – 1451)

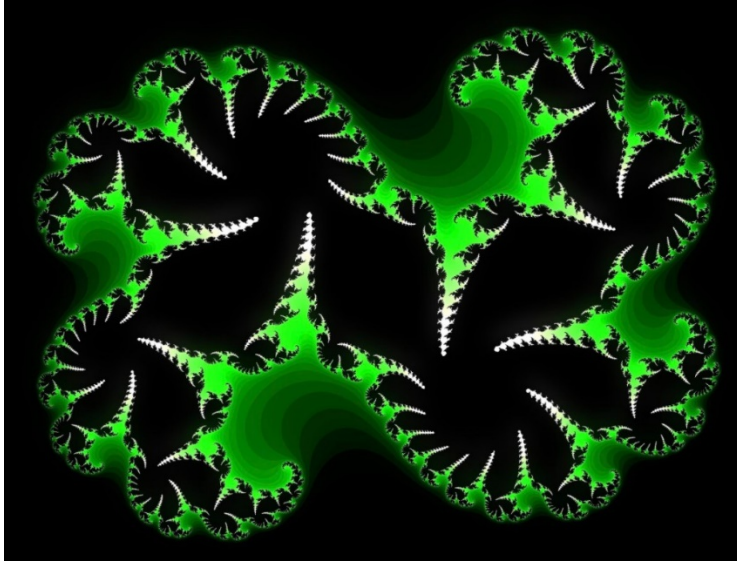
"You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anyone in the entire universe, deserves your love and affection."

Buddha

"Helping someone else can be as simple as opening a door. It can be as easy as listening in a genuine way. And that's the way we'll change the world – one person, one situation, one act of kindness at a time."

Richard Wagamese, Ojibway writer, excerpted from his book, "[One Story, One Song](#)"

STRESS



Chapter 29: STRESS - ITS SCIENCE & MANAGEMENT

"Research has linked even moderate levels of stress to lower life expectancy"

Economist magazine, 25 April 2015

Stress: What It's Good For

The human body is beautifully adapted to dealing with *acute* stress - getting blood, nutrients and energy to those muscles most needed to get us out of imminent danger - **quickly!**

Picture yourself at a beautiful Polynesian resort lolling about on a surfboard a couple hundred feet offshore - the sun is shining brightly, your family is frolicking happily on the beach, you've not a care in the world - life couldn't be better.

And then, without warning, a siren blares out, shocking you out of your peaceful bliss - there's a SHARK in the water!!!!

In a split second your body kicks into action:

- Your sympathetic nervous system, the one responsible for quickly mobilizing the body, kicks into action. At the same time, your parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for calming the body, shuts down.
- Epinephrine (aka adrenaline) is pumped into your blood stream, triggering a rapid cascade of escape-assisting activity. Its quick release gives you that "kicked-in-the-stomach" feeling.

- Your heart starts racing, pushing more blood and nutrients to your shoulder, arm, and leg muscles so that you can start motoring like a paddlewheel on a Mississippi steam boat.
- Your blood pressure rises as a result of your pounding heart.
- Under the influence of the extra epinephrine, your platelets (blood cells that promote clotting) start clumping together more readily, thus thickening your blood, helpful should you suffer bodily injury.
- Your breathing quickens to suck in more oxygen for those hard-working muscles.
- Insulin secretion is suppressed and fat cells' sensitivity to insulin is reduced - no point removing glucose from the blood when it's urgently needed.
- Glucose, proteins, fats, and "bad" cholesterol are sucked out of your fat cells, liver, and non-essential muscles and dumped into your blood stream to provide your shoulder, arm, and leg muscles with *immediate* fuel - no time to wait for that bacon-and-egg breakfast to digest. In fact, digestion comes to a halt to re-direct energy to where it's needed *right now*.
- Your colon contracts making you involuntarily soil your bathing suit - and it's the runny diarrhea kind. No point wasting energy removing water from faeces or carrying around excess weight.
- To conserve energy, non-essential activities like appetite, digestion, bone growth, pain sensation, and sex drive are all suppressed.
- With digestion and stomach acid levels temporarily decreased, renewal of the stomach's acid-resistant protective lining is minimized.
- The immune system is temporarily boosted in readiness for a short-term danger.
- Your senses become more acute.
- More blood and nutrients are directed to your brain, enhancing your ability to remember facts (such as how to escape from a shark)!

And then, after you make it to shore safely, the whole process reverses: the parasympathetic nervous system kicks in to calm you down, your heart rate and breathing slow, your blood pressure drops, nutrients begin to be re-deposited to your fat cells, epinephrine levels go back to normal, and routine bodily activities like digestion and cell growth re-start; beautiful!

Stress: What It's Bad For

Unfortunately, this wondrous system for keeping us safe in the face of imminent, life-threatening danger cannot distinguish between *real* danger and things that are *merely upsetting*.

It also kicks in over situations like discovering a big scratch on your car door, or being overwhelmed at work, or having to rush home to feed your daughter and then get her to her 6pm soccer practice on time - across town and through rush-hour traffic.

When chronically triggered over life's little stuff, our stress reaction turns from saviour to annihilator, leading to:

- A five-fold increase in the risk of developing cardiovascular disease.
- A suppressed immune system.
- Increased risk of anxiety disorders and depression in later life among children born to chronically-stressed mothers.
- Increased risk of diabetes and greater difficulty keeping it under control.
- Increased junk food craving and fat storage.
- Increased sensitivity to stressors and an impaired calming system.
- Increased risk of gastrointestinal disease such as an ulcer.
- Increased risk of osteoporosis.
- Increased risk of reproductive problems.
- Increased risk of memory impairment.
- Increased impulsivity and emotional swings coupled with impaired decision-making ability.
- Sleep impairment (and the [many harms](#) this brings on).
- Increased risk of depression and of anxiety disorders.
- Among the elderly, an increased risk of memory impairment and compromised ability to generate new neurons.
- More easily fatigued.
- Greater risk of substance abuse.

Our Ugly Side

Aside from the physical and mental damage caused by chronic stress, it also turns us into the person no one wants to be around. When stressed, we tend to exhibit the following traits:

- We feel there is an urgent need to fix whatever appears to be the problem, but this at precisely the moment stress has taken our wisdom "off-line" (this by compromising our ability to access our prefrontal cortex, the locus of our executive functioning).
- We raise our voice.
- We lose our sense of humor.
- We act in an abrasive manner and lose our kindness and compassion for others.
- We lose the ability to concentrate. We are quick to judgment and blame.
- We say and do things that damage relationships.
- We are unpleasant to be around which further strains our relationships.

As covered at the outset, our stress system evolved to protect us from acute, short-term, imminent danger and it still serves this purpose - put your hand on a hot stove and you will automatically react, no need to consciously think about what to do.

However, our stress system has yet to evolve to the point where it is able to discern the difference between true danger (which is rare and short-lived) and those things we merely find upsetting (which are numerous, frequent, and often drawn out).

This latter type of stress is referred to as "psychological stress", ***the kind we totally make up in our heads.***

So, subject the stress system to numerous, frequent, drawn-out, troubling thoughts and we put ourselves at risk for all of the ills outlined above.

In short, being chronically stressed is awful for us - physically, mentally, and socially - with implications that have the potential to extend into the future, affecting our children and grandchildren.

The Future Nature of Stress

By its very nature, psychological stress is rarely about things that have already happened (unless what happened in the past has potential future consequences, in which case, stress and anxiety are still about the future).

So, when our body is here, in this present moment, but our mind is in the future, we will inevitably experience anxiety and stress.

For example, picture yourself starting a beautiful day with a nice warm shower, joyfully breathing in the scent of your favorite shampoo, smiling inside and feeling terrific when, suddenly, into your head pops your day's very long, very arduous to-do list: goodbye good feelings, hello stress. Your body is in the shower, but your mind is already at the office.

Whenever we do this we can immediately feel the stress reaction in our body – our muscles tighten, our stomach begins to churn, a sense of grim despair settles over us – and all because our body and mind have just entered different time zones.

A second factor that contributes to stress is the sense that we are not up to dealing with the future. After all, if our to-do list were completely manageable, we wouldn't be stressing about it.

Such self-doubt appears to be a common human frailty, as evidenced by this snippet of wisdom from almost two-thousand years ago:

“Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason that today arm you against the present.”

Marcus Aurelius, Roman emperor, 161-185 AD

Factors That Accentuate the Harm of Stress

Four factors often cited for making it more likely that a stressor will inflict harm include:

1. **Lacking a sense of control over the stressor.** Work in a job where you have little or no control of your work load, the way you work, or your working conditions and you are at greater risk of the job's stressors making you sick. Even having the *perception* of control is better than feeling you have zero control.
2. **Facing a stressor that is unpredictable.** Even if you lack control over a stressor, knowing things like its timing, duration, or extent are still going to help lessen its impact.
3. **Lacking healthy mental coping techniques or physical outlets to deal with the stressor.** Mindfulness practice is one example of a healthy outlet for dealing with stress. Another is exercise because it mimics what the stress response was created for - physical exertion to escape danger.
4. **Lacking perspective about the stressor.** One person's stressor is another's interesting stimulation, only the thought about the stressor differs; change the thought, change the perspective, and the stressor ceases to be stressful. This is empowering.

Stress Management

Here, then, are some techniques and perspectives on managing stress:

Techniques for Managing Stress

1. **Change the situation or remove yourself from it**, if you are able. If this is not possible, then full and total **acceptance** is your only other sane option. Once accepted as your reality, some of the other coping techniques can then be brought into play.
2. **Practice P.B.S.:** 1) **P**ause and close your eyes to block out sensory distractions and facilitate a calming inward focus. 2) **B**reathe slowly and deeply two to three times, in for four, hold for seven, out for eight. This activates your calming parasympathetic nervous system. 3) **S**mile, inwardly or outwardly, even if forced. As discussed in a Psychology Today article ("[There's Magic in Your Smile](#)", by Dr. Ronald E. Riggio) this releases feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins.
3. **Practice S.T.O.P.:** 1) **S**top whatever it is you are doing. 2) **T**ake a few slow, deep breaths. 3) **O**bserve your thoughts, feelings, and emotions, becoming consciously aware of them and naming them ("I'm feeling anger", "I'm feeling frustration", etc.) which has been found to diminish their ill effect. 4) **P**roceed to do yourself a kindness; take a stroll, have a friendly chat, go grab a healthy snack, etc.
4. Take a moment to **sense which muscles are tight due to stress**. Next, breathe deeply and slowly while consciously **relaxing those muscles**. Because body and mind are intimately connected, it is not possible to be stressed and completely relaxed at the same time.
5. If feasible, **increase your exercise regimen**. It is important to burn off all the extra energy released by your stress hormones.

6. **Practice insight (vipassana) meditation** (see Chapter 5: "*Meditation – Why Bother?*"). Notice the feelings underlying your stress - anger, frustration, fear, guilt, envy, embarrassment - whatever they may be. As per the S.T.O.P. technique, mentally call them out.
7. **Practice Tonglen meditation** (see Chapter 5), a technique that changes your focus away from "woe is me" to one of concern for all others in similar straits, mentally taking in all of their suffering and, in its place, sending out good wishes for them, as well as yourself, to be at peace.
8. **Re-double commitment to your mindfulness practice** (see Chapter 4: "*How to be Mindful*") to keep your focus on the present moment and so stop your anxious mind's troubled wandering.
9. **Slow down everything you do**, otherwise your rushing will send a signal to your stress system that danger is afoot. And don't be concerned that slowing down implies that your productivity will suffer. If anything, by calming a scattered, rushed mind, your enhanced clarity of thought will make you more productive. It is no coincidence that our best ideas typically come to us when we're relaxing in the shower or are snuggled in our bed half-awake in the pre-dawn of morning; in other words, times when our minds are still - the only time our subconscious intelligence is able to reveal itself.
10. Related to the previous point is to also **slow down your life** - say 'no' to those things you really don't wish to do so you are able to say 'yes' to those things in life that bring you joy (including the joy of doing of absolutely nothing)!
11. **Seek out quiet.** Noise is a stressor and so best avoided. For example, near the end of my career my employer changed to an open-concept office layout. For the sake of my sanity, I invested in a good set of noise-canceling headphones. From a stress-management perspective this returned control to me. It also replaced the unpredictability of office noise with the predictability of my favorite classical music.
12. **Seek out soothing music and sounds.** Related to the previous point, [meditative music](#) or just gentle sounds aid in accessing your calming parasympathetic nervous system and turn off its high-alert sympathetic counterpart. A walk in the woods to simply listen to the forest sounds also works in the same manner (with the added benefit of exercise).
13. **Seek out social support.** There is a link between social isolation and having an overly-active sympathetic nervous system. As a result, staying close to family and friends not only makes you happier but also helps manage stress.

Perspectives on Managing Stress

1. **Keep things in perspective.** As outlined in Chapter 12 ("*Keeping Life in Perspective*"), we often place great importance on issues that, in the big scheme of things, are little more than trivia.
2. **Change your thinking.** Remember that it is not external circumstances that cause your stress but, rather, your perspective *about* such situations that does. Change your thinking, change your perspective, and your take on the situation changes as well; a stressful situation is suddenly seen as tolerable.

Remember that you are always the master of your thoughts, they are not the master of you. If you do not feed negative thoughts, if you do not give them your continued attention, they will dissipate of their own accord and healthier thoughts will take their place.

Psychological stress is nothing more than troubled thoughts. Remember that thoughts cannot hurt you, they are merely ephemeral biochemical reactions going on in your brain, they have no physical existence of their own. They are real, but they're not reality.

3. **Remember that pain and impermanence are an inescapable part of life** and that resisting this reality leads directly to needless suffering, making an already unpleasant situation even worse.
4. **Have confidence in yourself** and know with certainty that you already possess the innate wisdom to deal with whatever life throws at you – because you do. Remember that to access that wisdom (i.e. your prefrontal cortex) you must be in a calm state of mind as otherwise you will be thinking with your decidedly-unwise amygdala. Think of it this way; even if the future turns out to be painful, you will assuredly handle it better if you approach it mindfully, using the calm, wise, responsive, and creative part of your brain rather than the unthinking, reactive part. With mindfulness practice, you get to choose.
5. **Think of stressful situations not as problems to be gotten rid of but as opportunities to strengthen your mindfulness practice.** After all, it's easy to be mindful when things are going your way. It's only when life throws up challenges that you truly get to put your mindfulness skills through their paces.

"The most precious opportunity presents itself when we come to the place where we think we can't handle whatever is happening."

Pema Chodron, "[When Things Fall Apart](#)"

"... the things we all find stressful - traffic jams, money worries, overwork, the anxieties of relationships. Few of them are "real" in the sense that a zebra or a lion would understand. In our privileged lives, we are uniquely smart enough to have invented these stressors and uniquely foolish enough to have let them, too often, dominate our lives. Surely we have the potential to be uniquely wise enough to banish their stressful hold."

Dr. Robert Sapolsky, "[Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers](#)"

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

APPENDIX A: THE SCIENCE OF STRESS

Cardiovascular Disease

The stress system was designed for acute, short-term stressors which lead to a *temporary* increase in your blood pressure. However, when chronically stressed, your blood pressure becomes chronically high.

Higher blood pressure and blood flow cause your artery muscles to thicken in order to handle the higher pressure and to control the higher flow rate. In doing so, they become less elastic which serves to further increase blood pressure - a vicious cycle has begun.

The left ventricle of your heart, the one being buffeted by the high-pressure returning blood flow, also experiences a thickening of its muscles, creating an imbalanced heart which increases the risk of an irregular heartbeat.

Chronic high blood pressure also damages the interior of your arteries at branching points, creating rough spots. As a result, inflammation-suppressing cells start congregating there. In addition, these rough spots trap things like fatty cells, "bad" cholesterol, clumped platelets, and miscellaneous fibrous crud. In this manner, an artery-blocking plaque is formed which can lead to heart attack and stroke.

Finally, there is a reason that high blood pressure is known as the 'silent killer' because much of the damage it wreaks occurs without symptoms. It is often under an episode of higher-than-normal stress that all the damage suddenly makes itself known and results in death.

It has been found that 'Type A' personalities (i.e. those individuals characterized by impatience, hostility, and hyper-competitiveness) are at greater risk of cardiovascular disease due to the fact that stressors have an amplified impact on such people.

Disease Susceptibility

While the immune system is boosted in the short-term, prolonged stress begins to suppress it. White blood cell and antibody production decline and white blood cells already in circulation are subjected to removal and destruction by stress hormones. As a result, when stressed, you become prone to catching whatever illness is making the rounds such as the flu or common cold.

In addition, frequent stress also increases the risk of developing an autoimmune disease (e.g. lupus, celiac disease, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, and psoriasis).

Generational Harm

The offspring of chronically-stressed mothers have been found to have greater "bad cholesterol" release when under stress, so your poor reaction to stress today may also harm your children.

For example, a fetus exposed to high levels of maternal stress hormones is at heightened risk of obesity, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and Type II diabetes. Further, its own children may also be at greater risk of these illnesses.

There is also some evidence that such children are at increased risk of both chronic anxiety and impaired brain development.

Juvenile Diabetes

By suppressing insulin production and the sensitivity of fat cells to insulin, chronic stress promotes insulin resistance, potentially increasing the risk of getting juvenile diabetes and making its control more difficult.

Junk Food Craving

In between chronic episodes of stress your body attempts to reverse the stress reaction process. The resulting stress hormones (known as glucocorticoids) stimulate appetite to begin replacing the energy stores that it expected you to use while fleeing from danger - *danger that never happened*.

And the foods these hormones lead you to prefer? That's right, the starchy, sugary, and fatty stuff. And because these food types make you feel good (by temporarily reducing the stress response) they make you crave even more of them, leading to yet more gunk in your blood stream to amplify the arterial damage caused by chronic stress.

Further, in the presence of high insulin (remember the insulin-resistance angle), these hormones also increase the storage of this junk food.

And just to make matters worse, they preferentially pack it away in fat cells around the abdomen. This is a dangerous location because fat released from abdominal fat cells more readily finds its way into your liver which then turns it into glucose. This leads to even higher blood sugar levels and even greater insulin resistance.

Impaired Calming Ability

By chronically shutting down your calming parasympathetic nervous system you become less able to calm down after upsets.

Digestive Tract Diseases

Chronic stress-related colon contractions can lead to Irritable Bowel Syndrome, a thoroughly unpleasant illness whose symptoms include cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, gas, and diarrhea, constipation, or both.

During the recovery periods between episodes of chronic stress, stomach acid levels return to normal and are greeted by temporarily-reduced stomach wall defences, resulting in ulcers.

Osteoporosis

With the growth of new bone and the uptake of calcium restricted, stressed adults are at increased risk of osteoporosis.

Impaired Child Development

A child subjected to stressors may experience stunted growth, impaired intellect, and personality issues making it difficult for them to fit into society.

Reproductive Issues

By reducing testosterone levels in men and estrogen levels in women, stress reduces sex drive.

Further, the achievement of a male erection requires activation of the calming parasympathetic nervous system. Given that stress triggers the exact opposite - the sympathetic nervous system - impotence often results.

In females, stress reduces the secretion of key reproductive hormones leading to reduced ovulation and insufficient uterine lining changes to support the implantation of a fertilized egg. The result is an inability to achieve pregnancy.

Memory Impairment

While short-lived acute stress enhances explicit memory (i.e. the ability to recall facts), chronic stress impairs it.

So, if you're stressing about that big exam tomorrow afternoon, it's likely that you won't be able to remember all the things you studied. Well, at least until you've calmed back down which, unfortunately, likely won't be until after the exam is already over.

Executive Functioning Impairment

Stress negatively impacts the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, the locus of our executive functioning - emotional control, impulse control, and creativity. Wise decision making is compromised.

Sleep Impairment

Stress impairs both the ability to get to sleep as well as the quality of whatever sleep you do get. This results in diminished attention, slowed working memory, an impaired ability to create new memories, reduced cognitive ability, a depressed mood, and an inflammatory response from the body (which, in turn, increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer).

In what becomes a vicious cycle, sleep deprivation itself is a stressor, resulting in elevated levels of stress hormones making you prone to all of the troubles outlined previously.

So, back to that big exam: pull an all-nighter studying and the resulting lack of sleep will impair your ability to recall all those facts you worked so hard to cram into your head.

Depression

Exposure to repeated and frequent stressful episodes increases the level of stress hormones which, in turn, increases the chance of developing depression (i.e. an inability to experience pleasure).

In part this is due to the fact that stress hormones can mess up the neurotransmitters that work on triggering the brain's pleasure pathways (i.e. dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine).

Women are more prone to depression than men, this thought to be due in part to their greater tendency than men to ruminate about their problems (unlike men who have a greater tendency to ignore their problems).

Stressors over which we believe we have no control can induce a feeling of helplessness, one of the symptoms of depression where sufferers give up on life. They assume it will only get worse even in the face of contrary evidence.

Diseases of the Elderly

As humans age, their ability to return to a calm state becomes impaired due to the fact that dissipation of stress hormones takes longer.

In addition, the elderly often have higher base levels of stress hormones even in the absence of stressors. These elevated stress hormones lead to all of the problems listed previously, including impaired memory and reduced production of new brain neurons.

Fatigue

Under acute stress your body taps into its existing stores of energy and postpones new deposition. If the stress is repeated and chronic, your energy level becomes depleted and you fatigue more easily.

Anxiety Disorders

Severe stress can both damage the hippocampus (thus impairing the ability to lock away memories for future recall) and make the amygdala permanently more reactive (thus making an individual yet more sensitive to stressors). The result is anxiety over a stressor without any conscious understanding of why you are feeling anxious.

Substance Abuse

Drugs like cocaine directly trigger the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that activates the part of the brain that creates the feeling of pleasure. As a result, if stressed, such drugs take away the pain of stress.

However, three problems occur. First, dopamine levels afterward drop *below where they were prior to taking the drug*. You feel even worse than before and so crave another hit to feel better again.

Second, the brain has a mechanism to limit the impact of excessive dopamine by becoming less sensitive to it. The result is the need for even more of the drug to get the same 'high'.

And third, in the absence of getting more of the drug, stress hormone levels in the brain increase greatly, leading to activation of the amygdala which triggers feelings of fear and anxiety.

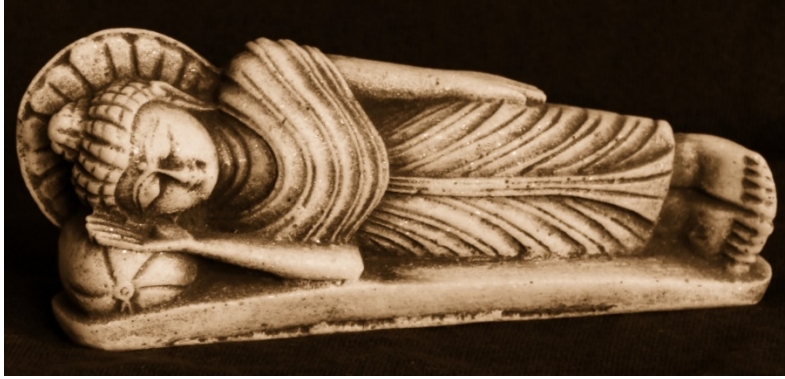
Addiction is the unsurprising result - an ongoing need to make the pleasure come back and make the fear and anxiety go away.

Income Inequality

While living in abject poverty is stressful and leads to many awful health outcomes, in most Western societies it is *relative* poverty that predicts ill-health.

In other words, it's not about how much money you have but, rather, how much money you have *relative to others* that generates stress.

As a result, the greater a society's income inequality, the worse the health of those on the bottom looking up.



Chapter 30: WORK / LIFE BALANCE

"Before capitalism, most people did not work very long hours at all. The tempo of life was slow, even leisurely; the pace of work relaxed. Our ancestors may not have been rich, but they had an abundance of leisure. When capitalism raised their incomes, it also took away their time."

Juliet Schor, author of ["The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure"](#)

I consider myself very fortunate to have been in the employ of a very caring company for the final 22 years of my career as a personal financial advisor. I felt listened to, supported, respected, and appreciated.

None of this, however, left me immune to the challenges of work-life balance. Despite already being a seasoned advisor at the time I joined the company in 1997, I struggled to keep up with the heavy workload.

As a result, I found myself staying later than desired most weeknights and going back into the office on many a weekend.

After enduring a year of this with no end in sight, I realized that something had to change, because:

1. ***I was begrudging the extra time spent at the office.*** Time I would have preferred to have spent with my spouse or engaged in my favorite leisure activities was being curtailed to fit in more time at work.
2. ***My job satisfaction was waning,*** and this despite truly loving my advisory role.
3. Despite being a generally happy, easy-going individual, ***I found myself feeling bitter and humorless.***

Of course, [my story is hardly unique](#). Indeed, for most Canadians and much of the rest of the world, this has become the norm.

For example, in a comprehensive [2012 study](#) of 25,000 working Canadians it was found that:

- the typical employee works more than 50 hours per week, this representing an extra full day of work each week.
- 54% took work home with them to do in the evening and/or on weekends.
- the typical employee spends an hour each *non-work day* checking work-related email.

And this pace is leisurely compared to work-life balance in the Chinese tech industry where ['996' work regimes](#) are currently the norm, this being a start time of 9am, a finish time of 9pm, and six days a week spent at the office.

Of course, all of this extra time working comes with serious consequences.

The Hazards of Working Too Many Hours

Beyond job dissatisfaction and less time to devote to life's many joys and passions, chronic overtime can have very serious physical and mental health implications:

- Mental [burnout](#).
- Significantly-increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease.
- Working long days leaves less time for sleep and can also impair sleep quality. [Lack of sleep](#) can result in reduced productivity, impaired judgment, increased irritability, increased risk of high blood pressure and other chronic diseases such as diabetes, a compromised immune system, increased risk of fatigue-induced accidents, increased risk of anxiety and depression, and weight gain.
- Increased stress (with all of the [hazards](#) this entails).
- Vision problems (typically from [staring](#) at a computer screen for too long).
- [Impaired cognitive performance](#).
- [Too much sitting](#) at a desk increases the risk of back problems, cancer, heart disease (irrespective of maintaining an exercise regimen), chronic illnesses like high blood pressure and diabetes, dementia in later life, and varicose veins.

When Long Hours Don't Impact Work-Life Balance

A distinction needs to be made between two categories of overtime:

1. The extra work we do because we *want to*.
2. The extra work we do because we *feel we have to*.

I personally toiled thousands of extra hours over my career delving into investment journals and creating my own financial planning tools, not because it was expected or because I felt obligated to do it or because it increased my income - I just found it fascinating and professionally rewarding. As a result, it wasn't a burden to me and so not a work-life balance issue.

Of course, many willingly toil well beyond a 40-hour week for other reasons, such as:

- They truly love what they do. Work is more akin to play than to work.
- Their income is directly linked to hours worked and the extra money means more to them than extra leisure.
- They have performance targets and believe that long hours will help them reach those targets and so enhance their annual bonus, again the extra money meaning more to them than extra leisure.
- They believe that being seen working long hours enhances their status within the company - a 'team player' - perhaps leading to future promotions.
- It's an expected part of the job at their firm and they accepted this fact going in.
- They have few outside interests so work is pretty much it for them.
- Their family life is a disaster so it's better being at work.

Therefore, *willingly* working long hours is not the problem, it's the work we ***grudgingly feel we have to do*** that upsets the apple cart of work-life balance.

Why is There Always More Work to Do Than Time to Do It?

Before we get to this question, let me make it clear that this post assumes employee and managerial competency:

- Well-trained, motivated staff who know how to do their jobs efficiently and have been provided the necessary tools to do it.
- Competent managers who limit their roles primarily to providing clear guidance on expected results, removing any pointless roadblocks that impede achievement of those results, and then getting out of the way to let their people get on with it.

So, with these points taken as a given, what are some of the key reasons we never have enough time to complete all our assigned tasks?

Two are often cited: 1) Office productivity killers. 2) Unrealistic workloads.

Productivity Killers

Certainly, the impairment of productivity is an important and widespread issue. Tragically, this often involves self-inflicted wounds that cumulatively conspire to decimate workplace productivity, such as:

- Open-concept office noise and distractions.
- Interruptions by colleagues.
- Email diarrhea.
- Meetings, meetings, meetings, ...

Without doubt these do impede getting one's actual work done in the time allotted, *but are not responsible for poor work-life balance.*

Unrealistic Workloads

In short, *unrealistic workloads are inevitable.*

Why so? Because organizations need to keep costs under control to ensure their survival. No company wants excess staff on its payroll, so efficiency dictates that head count always be kept *just below* what is actually required.

Simply put, if your competition can make the same product as you do at a lower cost by being more productive - doing more with less - then they could end up putting you out of business.

CEOs spend much of their time worrying about this very issue - how to marshal resources in the most efficient way to seize opportunities and maximize profit.

But it's not just publicly-listed and other for-profit companies that are impacted. Even not-for-profit organizations face pressure to deliver value-for-money to clients, funding bodies, and donors.

In other words, *where competition exists*, survival of the fittest applies pressure on firms to do more with less.

On the other hand, *in the absence of competition* (e.g. unionized public sector positions) there is [some evidence](#) that employees tend to have better work-life balance, generally working to fixed schedules (and quitting times) and putting in less overtime than private sector employees. Anecdotal evidence, in the form of personal friends working in the Canadian public sector, supports this finding.

So, neither workload nor productivity impediments are to blame

What this means is that, where competition exists, even if we all suddenly became that much more productive, either head count would shrink or work demands would expand to fill the time saved - the problem of work-life balance would remain firmly intact.

My own experience corroborates this. I got my first full-time job back in 1980, a time when neither desk-top computers nor email yet existed, both unquestionably boons to productivity.

However, their widespread adoption (computers in the mid-80s and email in the early 90s) failed to banish work-life balance issues. Indeed, the term 'work-life balance' really didn't make into the lexicon until the *late* 80s, making this a clear case of productivity-enhancers rendering the workplace *more* onerous, not less.

Smart phones are another case in point. Wonderful tools for productive communication and information access but with the insidious downside of being able to remain work-connected 24/7 and the implicit expectation that comes with this. Is it any surprise that, in its day, the once-popular Blackberry was only half-jokingly known as the "Crackberry" for its addictive powers.

And as for staff numbers adjusting to economic reality, I was a mining engineer at the time of the 1981 recession and a financial advisor at the time of the 2008 financial crisis. In both instances, as profit declined, staff were fired to bring costs back in line with revenues - but the workload didn't decrease.

So, no, productivity issues are *not* at the root of the work-life balance issue and corporate survival ensures that workload will *always* exceed staff capacity to complete all of it.

Why Do We Grudgingly Work So Much?

So, faced with more work than can realistically be done in a normal work day, why do we feel compelled to try to get all our work done knowing it's an impossible goal?

I believe there is only one reason - ***fear*** - both corporate and personal: ***corporations fear being competed out of business and individuals fear being competed out of a job.***

The Work-Life Dilemma

Because of these fears, resolving the work-life balance issue is akin to resolving the nuclear arms issue - no company and no employee wants to be the first to cut back hours because they believe they will be put at a disadvantage.

It is for this reason that employers are conflicted when it comes to this issue: having their staff put in extra hours for no extra pay helps them do more for no extra cost, but not taking work-life balance seriously can make it hard to attract and retain quality employees.

Little surprise then that employers tend to send mixed messages, espousing work-life balance on one hand while generally turning a blind eye to its absence in practice.

But employees also feel conflicted, desperately wanting work-life balance but fearing they'll be sacked if they try to make it happen.

Indeed, I witnessed this type of fear first-hand during the closing years of my career. Some of my colleagues, though putting in significant overtime, chose not to submit requests for validly-earned overtime pay for fear of being seen as the only one unable to keep up with the workload - no one wanted to be the first-mover.

So, What's the Solution?

What, then, will it take to eliminate this scourge on working life?

Because of its near-global presence, it is clear that work-life balance is a **societal issue**, and such issues typically only get resolved if enough brave individuals begin to stand up for themselves and demand change.

Their example can quickly unleash a tidal wave of support when the issue they agitate against touches so many lives, as work-life balance does.

This is how brutal autocrats worldwide are toppled and decency brought back into blighted societies. And it is how common-place work-life balance will eventually be achieved: *through individual effort snowballing into widespread cultural change.*

And It's Already Happening!

The good news is that some enlightened societies, like the European Union and the Scandinavian countries, have already decided that enough's enough and so have imposed legislation to soften the impact of capitalism.

This is reflected in the [list below](#) that shows the average number of hours worked per year in the year 2021 by full-time employees in various countries:

- 2300 China
- 1970 South Korea
- 1790 U.S.A.
- 1690 Canada
- 1610 Japan
- 1520 Finland
- 1490 France
- 1440 Sweden
- 1360 Denmark
- 1350 Germany

Remarkably, despite already posting the lowest annual working hours among OECD countries, German companies are having to become even more beneficent toward their employees as cultural and demographic changes (i.e. a declining number of working-age people, this a near-worldwide occurrence) increasingly shift bargaining power to employees and so push work-life balance higher up the agenda of job-seekers.

Even China's downtrodden tech workers are [beginning to speak up](#) against their punishingly-long hours.

So, change can happen, but until then, it's up to *you* to speak up for yourself.

It's up to You, and You, and You,

In 2013, Mr. Kai-Fu Lee (*one of China's best-known entrepreneurs and former President of Google China*) revealed his lymphoma diagnosis in a message to his 50 million followers on Sina Weibo. But what has resonated far wider is his repudiation of the 'work-comes-first' mentality that drives so many Chinese business people.

"It's only now, when I'm suddenly faced with possibly losing 30 years of life, that I've been able to calm down and reconsider," wrote the 52-year-old founder and CEO.

Excerpted from [Todayonline magazine](#), 15 Sept 2013

Sadly, it often takes just such a tragic circumstance to get us to re-evaluate what's truly important in our lives, wake up to the self-inflicted insanity we have brought upon ourselves, and regain balance.

But here's the rub - we don't need an excuse. ***If we can do it under tragic circumstances like this, we can do it any time we choose.***

And therein lies the solution:

Work-life balance is a choice - our choice, our collective choice - but it all starts with You.

Thoughts on Achieving Work-Life Balance

Choosing to say 'no' to a chronic work-life imbalance, to actually get up the gumption to advise your employer that you're no longer going to work the hours you have been, may sound scary.

But it shouldn't be if dealt with mindfully, openly, honestly, realistically, and in the spirit of goodwill that usually exists between employee and employer (and if it doesn't, you're working for the wrong company).

So, if you're ready to take concrete steps to regain work-life balance - and do your part to drive societal change - here are some things to consider:

Take charge

Only *you* know what work-life balance means to you and only *you* can make it happen. No one is going to come up to you and say, "*Here, let me help you achieve work-life balance.*"

Keep the End-Goal in Sight

As you negotiate your way toward work-life balance, always keep in mind what's at stake - all the life-enhancing moments that collectively contribute to helping make *your* life great - **all the things you will regret not having devoted more time to at life's end**. After all, what's life all about? Work? Partly, of course, but there's way more to life than work.

You're likely worth way more to your employer than you think you are.

Assuming you're a capable, self-starting, congenial, positive individual, replacing you comes with significant costs:

1. The cost of hiring your replacement.
2. The cost of bringing that person up to your level of knowledge and experience.
3. The cost in lost productivity and increased errors in the meantime.
4. The negative impact your termination has on morale and, hence, other potential departures.
5. The cost associated with the loss of your future higher productivity that would have resulted had you been retained, but this starting from your already high skill level that may be many years ahead of your replacement.
6. The financial cost of compensating you for termination.
7. The potential cost of making a hiring mistake and having to go back through the entire hiring process again, with yet more cost.

Your employer is espousing work-life balance. You're simply following through on it.

Being a professional entails having open, honest conversations with your employer about what work-life balance means to you - what your boundaries are and what your commitments are.

This obviously is a very individual issue - your definition of work-life balance may be quite different from that of your colleagues, and that's to be expected.

In the end it all comes down to give and take between you and your employer. They justifiably expect results and you justifiably expect a life beyond work. Almost assuredly there is common ground between you and your employer. And if there isn't, then you still have a choice - find a better employer.

Happy employees are more productive employees

Your value to your employer increases if you're happy at work because it's been shown to [enhance productivity](#). Accommodating work-life balance is a powerful means to impact employee happiness.

Of course, we've already covered the negative mental and physical harms of over-work, all of which impede productivity, so avoiding over-work benefits both staff and the company.

Companies with work-life balance can attract and retain better staff

Imagine you're looking for a job and have narrowed your choice down to two otherwise identical employers. Without question, you are going to choose the one that has a reputation for treating its employees better - the one that actually cares about its people's work-life balance.

Such a company has the luxury of being picky about who it hires and so can preferentially select superior workers who are more creative and productive.

Being more productive, the company need not compete head-to-head on compensation to remain competitive. It's the uncaring company with the less productive staff that needs to offer more pay in order to try to compensate for the longer hours that would be needed to compete with the more productive company.

And if the caring company does match compensation (which it could given its higher productivity)? It's easy enough to see how the uncaring company could enter a death spiral, unable to compete on productivity, working conditions, or compensation sufficiently high to offset those awful working conditions.

The good news on this front is that this is already starting to happen. Unlike us old Baby-Boomers, today's younger workers are increasingly asking prospective employers about work-life balance, and opting for those companies that actually take it seriously.

Life is precious, short, and could end much sooner than anticipated. Do you really want to fritter away a big chunk of it toiling in misery?

We tend to live life as if we're immortal, our eventual death an event that's going to occur in some far-distant future. But we all know this isn't reality. Even in my limited social sphere I can think of dozens of friends, relatives, former classmates, and former colleagues who died young.

I myself could have died on 24 March 2017 when I was involved in a serious head-on car accident. Had I been hit by a larger vehicle that day I seriously doubt I would be around to write these words.

It shouldn't take a life-altering health scare or other tragedy to wake us up to the preciousness of life. Yes, work is a fulfilling and necessary part of our lives, but its importance truly needs to be kept in perspective. And only we can make the choice to ensure that it plays its fair role, but no extra. It's all a matter of taking responsibility for our own lives.

Flexible work arrangements may make work more pleasant, but do not directly address the problem of grudgingly-worked long hours.

Take the increasingly popular flex-hours idea - giving staff the ability to come and go as they choose to better accommodate their lifestyle, provided they still put in at least the contracted amount of time.

This obviously is of no help resolving work-life balance if you're still begrudging the number of hours you have to toil, even if they are put in flexibly.

Work-from-home is another trend gaining acceptance by employers (and boosted materially by the Covid-19 pandemic). But once again, if you simply replace long hours at the office with long hours at home, nothing has been accomplished (indeed, there is evidence that those opting to work from home actually put in even more hours than those working from the office).

What about equal time off in lieu of those grudgingly-worked extra hours? On the face of it, this sounds a fair trade because your total hours worked now mathematically fits your concept of work-life balance.

But there are two problems with this arrangement. First, it is almost never the case that the extra time off comes anywhere close to the extra time worked.

Second, even if it is a one-for-one swap, all those extra hours spent at the office mess up your life over an extended period of time whereas the extra time off is concentrated into a day or two.

For example, let's say that work-life balance to you means going home at 5pm each night but the workload is such that you feel compelled to work to 6pm most days. So, over a two-week span let's say you accumulate eight hours of grudging overtime. Then, in lieu of this, you get an extra day off.

Would this feel like a fair trade-off? Two weeks of misery, followed by an extra day off, followed by another two weeks of misery, reprieved by another extra day off? I don't believe so.

On the day you retire, no one is going to remember or care about all those extra hours you grudgingly put in over the years.

All those years spent putting in extra time at work, depriving yourself of other pleasures, and what do you get? If you're lucky, a party, a card, a gift or two, a smattering of applause, and then you're gone; *replaced and quickly forgotten*. Does this sound like a trade-off you really want to make?

Setting clear boundaries and then sticking to them is essential

Work-life balance is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Just because your colleague Johnny (or, even worse, your boss) is willing to work crazy hours doesn't mean it should suit everyone else, because we're each different.

As a result, only *you* know your work-life boundaries. It is essential that you know these boundaries, be able to verbalize them to your employer, and then stick to them, because in their absence you will end up saying 'yes' to requests to which you should have said 'no'.

And if a request isn't actually a request but an order? Then you owe it to yourself - for the sake of truth, honesty, and reality - to advise your employer that taking on that new task necessarily means that others on your to-do list will either be delayed or, indeed, dropped entirely.

Achieving work-life balance requires realism. If your employer doesn't wish to face up to reality, then it may be time to find another employer.

We already have boundaries - we just need to choose better ones

All of us eventually choose to stop working at some point each day, meaning we all have chosen boundaries; we've just settled on ones that don't provide us with work-life balance.

So, bearing this in mind, *choose a better boundary that does*. You still won't get all your work done regardless, but you'll be a happier, healthier, more productive employee as a result.

And, as mentioned above, in the end, no one's going to remember or care how much time you put in or how many widgets of production you contributed toward the welfare of humankind during your time on this earth. You're way more important to *you* than to the collective - so keep this firmly in mind.

Setting work-life boundaries shows you to be a thoughtful professional

Were I a manager, I personally would be impressed by someone who had taken the time to be able to clearly verbalize the following:

1. Based on my strengths, here is how I see myself contributing to the betterment of this company.
2. Here is my plan to achieve the performance targets I've been assigned.
3. Here are the boundaries within which I plan to work in order to achieve work-life balance.

As a manager, I know I would appreciate having clearly-defined work parameters from each member of the team rather than possessing only a vague sense of each one's expectations and plans.

If no one can keep up with the work, it's not you, it's the job

When we're always behind at work we start to question our competency and have a tendency to feel that we're the only one who can't cut the mustard. But here's the thing - if all those around you doing the same role are also struggling, *then it's not you, it's the job.*

You must be prepared to quit if work-life balance is unattainable

In the end, if you are unable to negotiate a suitable work-life balance with your employer, then you must either be prepared to quit and find another employer that is more accommodating *or accept that your life is going to be less than you had hoped it would be - **your choice.***

Final Word

Living a mindful life is all about making wise choices. And making such choices necessitates facing up to reality - head on - and not shying away from situations we fear.

Given its prevalence, achieving work-life balance is clearly a fearful situation for just about everyone.

However, if dealt with openly, honestly, realistically, and with goodwill and calm confidence, I believe it to be within everyone's reach.

So, time to do your part for this obviously much-needed societal change!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

Addendum

Choosing Work-Life Balance: My Own Story

At the outset of this post, I referenced my own lack of work-life balance. Here is what I did to bring sanity back to my own job as a personal financial advisor:

- I found that my days were scattered, doing whatever happened to hit my desk at any given moment; quickly responding to email, always answering the phone whenever it rang,

In short, I was reacting to the job rather than being proactive. Of course, working in this manner is stressful because you feel like you've got no control - you're always at the mercy of external events. So, to regain control, I made a list of my duties, prioritized them, estimated how much time each would require, and then built a fixed weekly schedule that blocked off specific times each day of the week to deal with *my most important tasks*.

- In doing so I acknowledged and accepted that the less-important tasks *may never get done* - how could they if I could barely keep up with the highest-priority items? Achieving work-life balance means facing up to reality, and reality is that there's always more work to do than time available, so if I was going to get home at a reasonable hour, something had to give.
- I ran my plan by a senior executive to gain their approval, which was granted.
- I stuck to the plan vociferously and faced whatever consequences arose, which proved to be near nil. Yes, my assistant initially had difficulty saying 'no' to clients who wanted to see me right away. However, she soon discovered that clients were more accommodating than she had imagined - after all, they too were busy professionals who understood the need to take control one's schedule.
- I began making more realistic promises to clients, pushing off fulfillment sufficiently far into the future to ensure I could get it done without having to put in overtime.
- And, most importantly, at the end of a normal work day, *I went home*. Was all my work done? Of course not! But then, *it never would be regardless of how late I stayed*.

And the outcome? I was proud of the service I provided my clients and, with the exception of one target, all of my results proved excellent - client satisfaction, client retention, new-client acquisition, new investment deposits, new insurance policies issued, financial planning value delivered, etc.

And the one target I consistently failed at? Well, that was the target dictating how many clients I was expected to meet with each year; I met with far fewer than my employer wanted.

However, that particular target was incompatible with my new way of working and my goal of maintaining work-life balance.

Nonetheless, given my success on the many measures that actually contributed to the profitability of the company (which hitting a meetings-per-week target doesn't), this proved more than a reasonable trade-off, for me and the company.

What my experience illustrates is that there's almost always more than one way to achieve success. After all, we each have unique skills and experience, so a one-size-fits-all approach to most jobs rarely makes sense.

In the end, I was able to be successful, achieve work-life balance, regain job satisfaction, and maintain a level of professionalism that I was proud of.

Now, I include my story not because I believe it can be blindly applied to every job out there, because it clearly can't. However, my point is that you almost assuredly have more control over your situation than you believe, so I truly hope you take whatever steps are necessary to achieve your own work-life balance.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

AND, IN CONCLUSION



Chapter 31: And, in conclusion

I began writing articles for "[Living a Mindful Life](#)" back in 2018 to help others realize the many psychological benefits of daily mindfulness practice.

Two benefits stand out for me in particular, these being ***an enduring peace of mind and an ease of being irrespective of personal circumstances***.

I hope, in some small way, I have accomplished this goal. While internet access to "[Living a Mindful Life](#)" (and, therefore, to me!) will continue, *this will be my final post*. I have said what I set out to say and feel it now time to set down my pen.

For me, mindfulness practice has been nothing short of life-changing, and I know it can be for untold others.

In this regard, ***you would be doing me an enormous favour were you to share "[Living a Mindful Life](#)" widely so that others may hopefully benefit as much as I have*** (and, to help you do so, here it is *in its entirety* in PDF format: [Living a Mindful Life](#)).

Parting Thoughts

If someone were to ask me which two mindfulness teachings have had the greatest impact on my life, here is what I would tell them:

Sometimes Life Sucks - But That's Okay

Not getting what we want or getting what we don't want *doesn't mean anything's wrong*, it just means we're alive.

Putting up a fuss over life's inevitable challenges just adds needless psychological suffering to an already-unpleasant situation.

So, the alternative? **Whatever life presents, just deal with it - minus the drama.**

We're All Just Doing the Best We Can

By far my most contentious posts have been those denying the existence of free will. While the belief in our ability to *choose* our actions (and, therefore, to be held responsible for our actions) is near universally held, my extensive exploration of this topic has lead me unequivocally to see free will for what it is; unsupported by either science or simple logic.

In its absence, it necessarily follows that ***each and every one of us is always doing the best we can at each and every moment.***

And isn't this a more compassionate way to make our way through this world? And were we to adopt this approach, what exactly would we be giving up? Only the copious blame, judgment, anger, acrimony, and hate that pervades this troubled world of ours.

I don't know about you, but this strikes me as a no-brainer.

Compassion reigns when we see the innocence in each other.

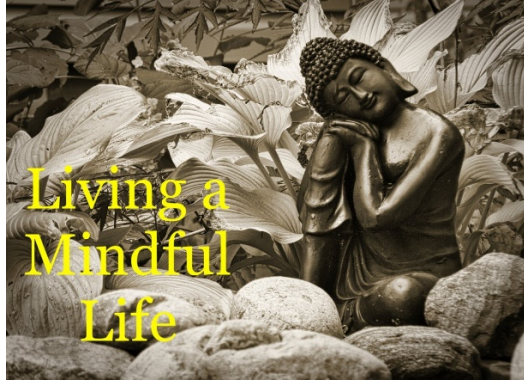
Thank You!

To all those who faithfully followed (and shared) my posts, to all those who took a few moments out of their busy lives to pose questions and provide insightful comments, and to all those who supported my efforts in other myriad ways, a most sincere, deeply-heartfelt thank you.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life

SUGGESTED READING



SUGGESTED READING

In no particular order, here are some of the books, articles, videos, apps, and courses that I have found particularly helpful for bringing meaning to the concept of mindfulness and for putting into context what it actually means to "live a good life":

Books

1. [Mindfulness - A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World](#) - Mark Williams / Danny Penman (*about mindfulness and meditation*)
2. [Wherever You Go, There You Are](#) - Jon Kabat-Zinn (*about mindfulness and meditation*)
3. [Slowing Down to the Speed of Life](#) - Richard Carlson / Joseph Bailey (*about the power our thinking has over how we feel*)
4. [When Things Fall Apart](#) - Pema Chodron (*about mindfulness and meditation in difficult times*)
5. [The Power of Now](#) - Eckhart Tolle (*about the benefits of living in the present moment*)
6. [The Enlightened Gardener](#) - Sydney Banks (*about the power our thinking has over how we feel*)
7. [You Can Be Happy No Matter What](#) - Richard Carlson (*about the power our thinking has over how we feel*)
8. [Buddhism Plain and Simple](#) - Steve Hagen (*about some of the core teachings of mindfulness*)
9. [The Wise Heart](#) - Jack Kornfield (*about some of the core teachings of mindfulness with a focus on wisdom*)
10. [Mindfulness in Plain English](#) - Bhante Gunaratana (*about mindfulness and meditation*)
11. [Choosing Civility](#) - P.M. Forni (*about choosing to overcome our base human traits*)
12. [The Four Agreements](#) - Don Miguel Ruiz (*ancient Mexican wisdom for leading a life of peace*)

13. [Mindfulness on the Go](#) - Jan Chozen Bays (*informal mindfulness practices and how they apply to key mindfulness teachings*)
14. [Why Meditate?](#) – Matthieu Ricard (*a meditation primer plus clearly-presented insights into mindful wisdom*)
15. [Incognito – The Secret Lives of the Brain](#) – Dr. David Eagleman (*essential background to understanding the often counter-intuitive workings of our brain and the irrefutable argument behind extending compassion to all, always*).
16. [Free Will](#) – Sam Harris (*further argument for the rationale behind extending compassion to all, always*)

Videos

1. [2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address](#) - David Foster Wallace (*a 20-minute video on the importance of choosing what to think*)

Mindfulness Courses

1. [Mindfulness Daily](#) - Jack Kornfield & Tara Brach through the company, "Sounds True" (*a low-cost compilation of forty teachings on mindfulness followed by short meditation sessions, each segment being about twelve minutes long*)

Websites

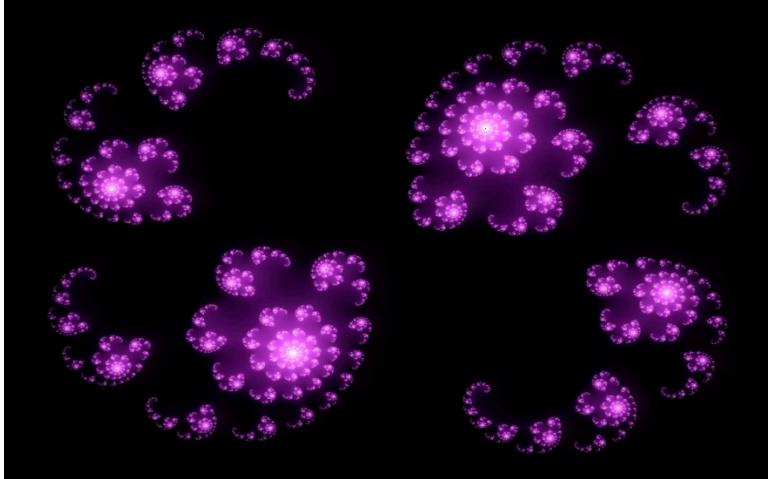
1. [The Three Principles](#) - Judy Sedgeman (*focused on the simple, but key, observation that it is not our external circumstances that dictate how we feel but, rather, what we choose to think about those circumstances that does*)
2. [Jack Kornfield](#) - Jack Kornfield (*articles and podcasts focusing on mindfulness and wisdom*)

Music - Meditative

1. [108 Sacred Names of Mother Divine](#) - Craig Pruess & Ananda (*sacred Sanskrit chants*)
2. [Moola Mantra](#) - Deva Premal

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



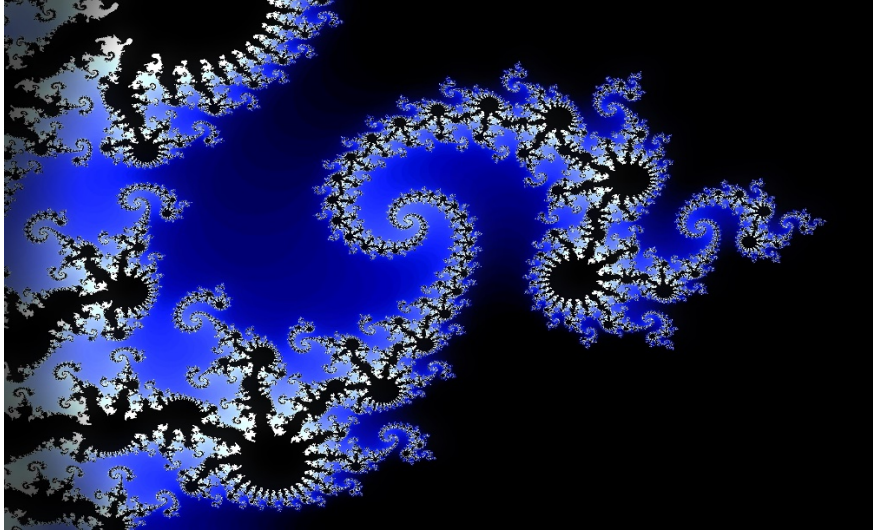
CONTACT US!

Please feel free to share your thoughts, pose questions, request a mindfulness presentation for your workplace or social group, or make suggestions for future mindfulness topics - I truly look forward to hearing from you!

Simply fill in the form on my website (<https://www.living-a-mindful-life.com/>) or send me an email (mindful@living-a-mindful-life.com) and I will personally get back to you at my first opportunity!

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life



SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

Spreading the word about the many benefits of mindfulness is a passion of mine because I have personally experienced and seen firsthand how it helps people lead better lives - lives that are more peaceful, more joyful, more compassionate and loving - irrespective of external circumstances.

Because of this, I enthusiastically welcome any and all opportunities to get up in front of a group, regardless of size, to talk about mindfulness.

I charge no fee for this service (although I won't turn down a small Amazon gift card!) as I see this as my way of helping to make this world of ours a better place -individually and collectively.

So, if you're looking for a speaker to come to your workplace or social gathering in person (if geographically close) or via video-conferencing (if not), please get in touch with me. You may do this either by email (mindful@living-a-mindful-life.com) or through my website (<https://www.living-a-mindful-life.com/>).

I look forward to working with you to custom-tailor a mindfulness presentation that meets your group's needs.

Warmest wishes,

Rob @ Living a Mindful Life