

# 7

Chapter

# Being in the Now: Mindfulness

I'd like for you to take a moment to consider when you feel most relaxed. Is it when you're watching a movie? On a hike? Gardening? Cooking? Reading?

Most likely you are realizing that, when you are most relaxed, you are in the present. All worry is about the future. Even when it's about the past, it's often about how it's affecting your future. Often people who are depressed spend a significant amount of time focused on past regrets. Thinking about how things might have been different, and particularly experiencing guilt, can contribute to down moods. Unless there is something that you want to do to rectify the past regrets, it's useless, and there is a clear advantage to being in the moment.

When we fully focus on the moment, we are in the present. Most of the time, the present is free of worry and troubles. Focusing on your senses is the way to free yourself from anxiety about the future and depression about the past and future.

When anything is truly awful in the present, we are typically not worrying. Rather, we are responding to the situation—often in a healthy way that fits the circumstances. Sometimes in these situations, anxiety can be helpful to motivate us to protect ourselves.

Some people believe that worry can motivate them to achieve more. Likewise, these individuals often worry that if they get too relaxed they will lose their edge. However, think about work for a moment. Think about when you are getting things done around the house. Remember that great feeling of being “on a roll,” focused, at peak performance. Again, put the book down for a moment and recall what it feels like to be at peak performance. During these times, are you mostly in the past, in the present, or in the future?

Productivity does involve some planning and consideration of the future. Certainly, a little bit of reflection can be useful to enable us to learn from past mistakes. However, we are most productive when we are in the moment. Whether at work, crossing things off our to-do list at home, or engaged in another project, peak performance with all tasks is achieved when we are primarily in the present. Not convinced? Next time you are feeling at peak performance, notice how much of the time you are in the present vs. how much time your mind is on the past or the future.

# Mindfulness of Senses

Make a list of at least three to five things that you like to do that you find relaxing:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Think about when you are engaged in each activity. Take a few seconds to close your eyes and visualize yourself engaged in this activity; put the book down for this exercise.

While doing these things, do you think you are mostly (check one):

In the past? \_\_\_\_\_

In the present? \_\_\_\_\_

In the future? \_\_\_\_\_

List your two favorites below. Check the senses you notice while engaging in each:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

Sight \_\_\_\_\_

Sound \_\_\_\_\_

Physical Sensation \_\_\_\_\_

Smell \_\_\_\_\_

Taste \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Sight \_\_\_\_\_

Sound \_\_\_\_\_

Physical Sensation \_\_\_\_\_

Smell \_\_\_\_\_

Taste \_\_\_\_\_

Now, in the space to the right of the senses you checked above, write one to three things you usually experience with each sense. Have you been mindful of all your senses when doing these things? Closing your eyes, take another moment to imagine yourself in the situation, being mindful of all your available senses. If you discovered additional sensations you weren't noticing before, add them to the list. Next time you're engaged in these activities, remember to notice all your senses.

**EXERCISE****General Mindfulness**

*Feeling the book in your hands. Noticing where you are touching the book. Noticing the black words on the light page. Noticing what you see in your periphery. In a moment, when you are ready, put the book down, noticing colors, shapes, and textures.*

*In a moment, adding awareness of patterns, shadows and highlights. Do this now.*

*Noticing the sounds that you hear indoors and outdoors, as you are reading this. Can you hear the sound of your breathing? If there are many sounds, thinking of these sounds like a symphony with each sound being a different instrument. Whether few or many sounds, closing your eyes to take a moment to listen.*

*In a moment, closing your eyes and seeing the backs of your eyelids, while also noticing the sounds that you hear.*

*Noticing where your hands are touching your book. As you continue reading, noticing the surfaces beneath you, the floor, chair, couch. Also, noticing any surface behind you. Becoming aware of the position of your arms and legs and where they are touching one another. Noticing the feeling of your socks, shoes, clothing, and jewelry.*

You can use the free recording "General Mindfulness." This recording may be used at any time, but it probably works best when you are sitting quietly. Find at least five minutes each day to engage in a mindful activity. It may be something that you are already doing, or it might be time you carve out of each day. If you already walk, run, garden, or cook, you can use these activities and similar activities for your mindfulness activity.

Alternatively, or in addition, plan at least a five-minute walk or take five minutes to sit outside or to look out of a window. It is better if you can set aside more time, but if I ask you to do 30 minutes you may not do it at all. When indoors, you can add aromatherapy, instrumental music, or a nature recording. Consider watching a nature DVD on mute, with or without music that you add.

Once your mindfulness skill has developed, you can use it to remain in the moment for most of your day. Become more mindful of beauty on a daily basis. While walking to and from your car, sitting at a stoplight, walking to public transportation, or on the bus or train, become more aware of nature. Noticing the sky and clouds, the sound of the wind and the birds, the feeling of the sun and the breeze. Also becoming more aware of the beauty in architecture and in other human-made things that are pleasing to the eye, such as fabric and art.

You can use the free recordings or scripts to help guide you and train you to be in the moment, thereby becoming mindful. The next free recording is "Walking Mindfulness." The recording is more involved and longer than the script. However, all the ideas in the recording are included in the walking exercises that follow the script.

**EXERCISE**

## Walking Mindfulness

To prepare for these walks, wear shoes suitable for walking and go outside. If you are a runner, you can use the recording while running too. Plan a time that you'd like to take a mindfulness walk using the free "Walking Mindfulness" track, or using the information in the script below. If using the recording, leave one earbud out so you can hear what is around you.

**Script:** *Beginning by focusing on what you see. Noticing the colors, shapes, and textures of plants, buildings, cars [pause]. Noticing the trees, seeing the colors and movement of the trees from the wind [pause]. Noticing the colors and any movement in the sky: clouds, birds, planes. As you begin to focus on the horizon, watching how the landscape is changing as you move forward [pause]. Feeling your movements, your muscles contracting in your legs, the swinging in your arms. Noticing how the earth below you feels as your feet touch the ground. Feeling the rhythm of your movements [pause]. Noticing the feeling of the breeze. Focusing all your attention on the breeze, noticing how it feels. Noticing how it moves trees, plants, your hair, the clouds [pause]. Noticing the sound of the breeze in your ear and noticing whether you can hear it moving leaves, wind chimes, or something else [pause]. Noticing other things that you might hear, such as the sounds of birds, cars, crickets, dogs [pause]. Noticing if there is something that you smell [pause]. Allowing your mind to float gently between your senses.*

### Walk 1

What did you discover from going on this mindful walk?

What thoughts distracted you from staying in the moment?

What strategies from previous chapters did you use to deal with those thoughts that distracted you?

What strategies from previous chapters would you like to use to deal with unwanted thoughts in the future?

On your next mindful walks, take some of the time to experiment with the following.

**Walk 2: Take a Non-Judgmental Stance**

While it may be impossible to do this fully, your goal is to avoid thinking of anything as positive or negative while observing your senses. For instance, fumes are not nasty, people are not ugly, homes are not pretty. This non-judgmental stance includes times that you begin to worry or otherwise stray from the moment; it's not bad, it just is. When thoughts interfere, remember that perfection is not the goal and accepting imperfection is.

**Walk 3: Like a Baby**

A baby can experience all their senses but has no words for their experiences. Observing only the raw sensations without labels on your next walk. Expect that you will have some labels but, to the extent possible, observing your senses like a baby would.

**Walk 4: One Sense, Two Senses, or All Senses?**

Observe how you feel while you are focusing on each sense. Which sense is your favorite? Your second favorite?

Also on walk 4, experiment focusing on one sense at a time, allowing the others to fall into the background even though you'll be aware of them. Next focusing on two senses at a time. Then allowing your mind to float freely between your senses. If you prefer one or two at a time, you can still vary them. For instance, you may begin by focusing on sight and sound, then move to focusing on sound and physical sensation, then to physical sensation and smell. In fact, your experiences may guide you. For example, you might be noticing the sounds of birds singing and feeling the ground beneath you when you feel, see, and hear the breeze increasing, so you switch to physical sensation and sound. When the breeze settles, perhaps you smell someone barbecuing. The wonderful aromas motivate you to switch to smell while still feeling the gentler breeze.

After walk 4, were you able to focus on the moment *most* of the time?

If you believe you were in the moment at least 75% of the time or if you are content with how it went (e.g., you thought about pleasant things from the past or future, and/or you worried significantly less than usual), you can skip the advice for walk 5.

**Walk 5: Labeling Your Experiences**

On your next walk, when you notice that you are unable to disengage from worries, label your experiences. For example, "*birds singing, sound of feet, colorful flowers, smell of flowers, hearing wind in the trees, feeling the wind, blue sky, white clouds, car exhaust, lamp post, dog barking, green grass.*" Once you feel you are in the present, go back to focusing on your senses like a baby would. When thoughts interfere, briefly taste the worry and gently shift back to the present, using thought labeling as needed.

Over the course of the next few days, engage in most of the activities listed on the next form and describe what your experience was like. While participating in each of these activities, your goal is to be focusing on your senses. However, we are thinkers. Therefore, expect that thoughts will interfere and, when they do, acknowledge the thought (rather than trying to push it out of the way) and "gently shifting your attention back to the moment."

## Self-Monitoring of Mindful Activities

In the first column there are a number of activities in which you can mindfully engage. In the second column, write a description of your experiences while you engaged in the activity (e.g., I never realized how great my shampoo smells. I really enjoyed feeling and listening to the water too. I loved how relaxed I felt during and after the shower.) In the third column, write the percentage of time you felt like you were in the moment.

Activity	Description of Mindful Activity	% of Time in the Moment
<b>Example:</b> Shower, in particular paying attention to the smells of your soap, shampoo, etc.		
Take at least a 10-minute walk, focusing particularly on nature		
Take at least a 10-minute drive. Unsafe? No! You are safest while being mindful of what you see and hear		
Do the dishes, paying particular attention to the suds		
If you are sexually active, engage in sexual activity focusing on your senses rather than anticipating climax		
Weather permitting, sit outside; alternatively, sit on a bench in a mall, or sit in a coffee shop by a window		
Create a mindfully-rich experience: get a piece of chocolate and a favorite beverage, and play instrumental music; light a candle or incense and watch it; or look outside or at a piece of art		

While it would be nice to record a 90% or 100% in the 3rd column, any improvement over what you currently do while engaged in these activities is progress. For instance, if while you are showering, you typically worry 80% of the time and are only in the moment 20% of the time, being in the moment even 40% of the time is a big improvement. Celebrate even small accomplishments!

Many people listen to music while on a walk, while showering, while eating, and so on. It's good for the soul to sing! However, when engaging in mindfulness, it's generally preferred to listen to the sounds around you. Alternatively, choose instrumental music, without words (chant is fine).

**EXERCISE**

## Start Making Scents

Smell reaches the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain, directly. The other four senses are first processed in the frontal lobes of the brain, which are responsible for higher mental processes. Therefore, smells are much more likely to trigger an emotional response than any of the other senses.

This emotional response makes the senses much more likely to be conditioned to events. For instance, if a woman is raped by a cigar smoker, the smell of cigars is very likely to elicit fear and trigger a flashback.

The same is true of pleasant scents. That is, smell can have a more immediate and profound relaxing effect than other senses. We can even learn to enjoy smells that most others find unpleasant due to conditioning. That is, if an otherwise unpleasant smell occurs at the same time as a very emotionally positive event, we can learn to love that smell. Perhaps the most common example of this is when people enjoy the smell of manure because it's associated with happy times at a family member's farm.

1. Choose a scent that you find pleasant. Find at least one of the following (preferably two or three) that has a similar or the same scent: a lotion, an essential oil, an incense, a spray, or a candle. You can purchase essential oils in some health-food stores (such as Whole Foods), Dollar Tree, some vitamin stores, some boutiques, and online.
2. If using an essential oil or spray, find an old dishrag, towel, or worn-out piece of clothing. Cut or tear a very small piece of the cloth (about one and a half or two inches square) and put a few drops of oil on it or saturate it with spray. To protect other things from the oil, wrap a larger piece of dry cloth around the scented cloth and secure it with a rubber band. The aroma will penetrate through the cloth but the oil won't. If you can't smell it, you either put too little essential oil on the scented cloth or you put too much dry cloth around it. You can also burn an essential oil or put it in diffusers around your house and in your office.
3. When you are relaxed, smell the cloth or use the lotion, spray, candle, or incense. The goal is to condition yourself to associate the smell with relaxation. One way is to pair your scent with times when you are relaxed organically (e.g., reading or watching TV). Another way is to practice quiet relaxation at home, put your chosen aromatherapy at arm's length when you begin, and then once you feel relaxed add the smell. Do this at least three times before going on to the next step.
4. Once you're conditioned to the smell, keep your aromatherapy with you and smell it when you're feeling stressed.
5. Continue to pair it with relaxation so that it remains a cue for relaxation, rather than one of stress.