

Mind The Gap: The Art of Conscious Living

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How many of us have attempted meditation?

“Not for me” you might say or “Yep, tried it but my mind just wanders”

What if I were to tell you that this practise of sitting still actually had sound evidence of its value and usefulness in your everyday live including leadership, decisions, your health, relationships and even your cognitive function?

Let me introduce to mindfulness.

What is Mindfulness?

Have you ever noticed that when you are doing something quite familiar and repetitive, like driving your car, or brushing your teeth or even eating, that your mind is often miles away thinking about something else? You may be fantasising about an upcoming holiday, worrying about some upcoming event, or thinking about any number of other things.

In either case you are not focusing on your current experience, and you are not really in touch with the ‘here and now.’ This way of operating is often referred to as automatic pilot mode.

Mindfulness is the opposite of automatic pilot mode. It is about experiencing the world that is firmly in the ‘here and now.’ Mindfulness means paying attention with openness, curiosity and flexibility. It is the “gap” between two thoughts.

Mindfulness is increasingly recognised as an effective way to increase fulfilment, reduce stress, raise self-awareness, enhance emotional intelligence, and undermine destructive emotive, cognitive, and behavioural processes. While many people think mindfulness means meditation, this is not the case. Mindfulness is a mental state of openness, awareness and focus, and meditation is just one way amongst hundreds of learning to cultivate this state.

Show me the evidence

Mindfulness has been practiced for many thousands of years in the East, through traditions like meditation, yoga, martial arts and tai chi. But it's only in the last 30 years that it has taken root in Western science, attracting the interest of some of the world's leading medical researchers, psychologists, neuroscientists and geneticists.

To neuroscientists, mindfulness has little to do with spirituality, religion or any particular type of meditation. Richard Davidson's studies with Buddhist monks showed that experienced meditators have an altered pattern of brain activity in the parts of the brain associated with regulating emotion and focusing attention.

Dr Craig Hassard from Monash University teaches mindfulness training to medical students. He has embarked on this training following findings showing high levels of depression and burnout amongst practising medical staff leading to 6.2 times as many medical errors as medical staff that were not. His research

has shown that mindfulness training has improved mindfulness, mood, reduced fatigue, anxiety and executive function. Executive function is an umbrella term for cognitive processes such as planning, working memory, attention, problem solving, verbal reasoning, inhibition, mental flexibility, multi-tasking, initiation and monitoring of actions.

Many further studies have now also been published in using mindfulness in the context of the general population. The practise of mindfulness leads to an improved ability to both self-regulate and self-monitor. This in turn supports improved emotional intelligence, early recognition of negative biases, and avoidance of technical errors, facilitation of self correction and better development of relationships.

How do I get some?

Mindfulness is developed by purposefully paying attention in a non-judgemental way to what is going on in your body, your mind and in the world around you.

Mindfulness is a trait that everyone has to some degree, and can be developed in many ways. It is a skill that takes time to develop. It is not easy, and like any skill it requires a certain level of effort, time, patience, and ongoing practice. I can tell you this from personal experience – patience is key.

Mindfulness can be learned in a number of ways. So let's start small:

- When in a conversation, stop and really listen to the other person. Remain perfectly silent and pay close attention to their choice of words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.
- Do one thing at a time and really focus on that task
- Undertake fun activities in which you are totally absorbed and for which no other thoughts get in the way
- When walking, pay attention to your footsteps, the sounds, your body moving – allow your senses to come alive and just notice
- In any everyday activity such as eating or even brushing your teeth, really just pay attention to the task at hand. Build this noticing into your everyday tasks

And when your mind wanders, accept what is and gently just bring it back to what you are doing in that moment.

Mindfulness matters because both in daily life and in organisational roles, we are trying to deal with too much input which is in turn having both a physiological and psychological impact. Prolonged stress and subsequent wear and tear on the body is preventing us from being out our best both from a health and well as mental perspective. This impacts on performance, relationships, fulfilment and our happiness.

So, please do mind the gap!

References:

1. Hassard, Dr Craig – Mindfulness: Why Attention Matters
2. Rock, David, 2009 – Your Brain at Work

