

Mindfulness in the Midst of Activity
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Have you ever spent an entire day at work caught up in a whirlwind of mindless activity, only to be startled back to your senses as soon as you stepped out the door? Suddenly you find yourself fully awake and alive in the moment. Perhaps you feel a refreshing breeze caress your skin as you breath in the cool air and drink deeply from the cascade of sounds, shapes and colors surrounding you. At moments like this it feels so good simply to be! While we can't expect to be this way all the time, we may find ourselves wondering why we are so often out of touch with our basic sense of aliveness. How often do you find yourself running around on automatic pilot, so busy doing, and thinking about everything under the sun, that you lose touch with the immediacy of your presence, right here, in this moment?

Try checking in with yourself, right now. As your sense of presence comes into focus, you may notice your breath, feel the weight of your body supported by whatever you are sitting on, be aware of your eyes scanning the page... and so on. If you continue like this, simply paying attention, on purpose, to whatever you are experiencing directly through your senses, moment by moment, then you are practicing what may be referred to as mindfulness. Coming back to your senses in this way, again and again, whenever you remember to, may enhance your appreciation for being alive and fully present in each moment. Your desire to return there more often, so as to be aware of your presence on as continuous a basis as possible, is the fuel that will feed your practice of mindfulness.

If bringing more mindfulness into your life appeals to you, then you may want to consider cultivating it in some way. There are a number of practices, both formal and informal, that you may want to explore. Formal practices, such as sitting meditation, yoga, and tai chi, require you to set aside time on a regular basis to focus exclusively on the practice.

This allows you to systematically develop the ability to regulate your attention and deepen your connection to your experience in the moment. Reserving some time in your schedule, on a regular basis, to practice mindfulness is well worth your time. But, don't take my word for it. Try it and find out for yourself.

Once you have developed a feeling for cultivating presence within the protected environment of formal practice, the prospect of maintaining mindfulness in the more complex world of everyday living, through informal practice, becomes more feasible. It's important to recognize, right from the start, that if you embark on the path of cultivating mindfulness, you will be up against powerful and deeply entrenched forces of habit and conditioning that will keep pulling you off center. That's why it's essential to develop some momentum through formal practice to help you maintain some level of mindfulness throughout your daily activities. It's also crucial to be patient and to keep letting go of any thoughts about your progress or lack thereof. Judging or criticizing oneself in this way and dwelling on such thoughts in an ongoing way is a self-defeating habit that is likely to breed discouragement, low self-esteem and procrastination.

Let's turn our attention now to some informal mindfulness practices. Perhaps you are thinking that your life is already so busy that you won't have time to try any of them. The good news is that

informal practice does not have to take up any extra time! These practices can be done in the midst of whatever daily activities you are already engaged in, simply by paying attention, on purpose to what you are experiencing. One way to get started would be to read through the following list of suggested practices, choose one that seems appealing, and try bringing it into your daily life for a week. Try to become one with the activity. Notice, without judging yourself, whether it enhances the quality of your life in any way. Then come back to the list, choose another one and try it for a week, and so on, until you have discovered which ones work for you. By this time you will have developed some momentum and your own personal list of ways to wake up, to be more fully engaged in whatever you are doing, moment by moment.

- Upon awakening, before getting out of bed, bring your attention to your breathing. Observe 5 breaths, feeling the belly rising and falling, as if riding the waves inhalation and exhalation.
- Pay attention to how your body feels when you move from lying down to sitting, to standing, to walking. Be aware of changes in your posture. Notice each time you make a transition from one posture to the next.
- Focus attention on your bodily sensations as you go to the bathroom, shower, brush your teeth and hair, exercise, get dressed, etc. Whenever you notice you are dwelling in thoughts, bring your attention back to your sensations.
- When you eat or drink, pay attention to the process of eating, especially savoring the sensations of seeing, smelling, tasting feeling and hearing.
- Washing the dishes, notice the movements of your hands, arms, and legs. See, feel and hear the water and the dishes. Keep letting go of any thoughts and turning your attention back to your sensations.
- Whenever you hear a phone ring, a door closing, a bird singing, a train passing, the wind, laughter, a siren--use it as a bell of mindfulness. Really listen and be present and awake.
- When you are standing or walking, feel the contact of the ground under your feet. Notice how you move and balance. Feel the air on your skin. Are you rushing?
- While driving, become aware of body tension. Notice if your hands are wrapped tightly around the steering wheel, shoulders raised, stomach tight, etc. Do you feel pressured? What does it feel like to relax and drive?
- Decide not to play the radio as you drive and focus your attention exclusively on seeing, hearing, and feeling whatever is happening, moment by moment.
- Be aware of your breathing and notice the sky, trees or quality of your mind when stopped at a traffic light.
- While at your workplace, pay attention to your bodily sensations. Notice areas of tightness or strain, especially in your neck, shoulders, jaw, and lower back. Exhale and try to release any excess tension.
- Whenever you are waiting in line, use this time to just stand and feel the contact of your feet with the floor. Feel your belly inflating as you inhale and deflating as you exhale. Notice if you are feeling impatient. Can you relax and just be there?
- Bring awareness to listening and talking, noticing how you are feeling in your body. Can you listen without jumping immediately to thinking about whether you agree or disagree? Are you giving all your attention to listening or are you planning what you will say when it is your turn?
- Decide to "stop" for a moment every hour during the workday to become aware of your breathing and bodily sensations. Take 5 breaths, allowing the mind to settle and regroup.
- As you lie down to go to sleep, be aware of your breathing. Observe 5 exhalations. Feel your body sink deeper and deeper into a state of relaxation and release.

Suggested Reading

Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life, by John Kabat-Zinn