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SIMPLIFY MAGAZINE

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Letter from the Founder

In this crazy, fast-paced world we live in, it's easy to feel overwhelmed, distracted, and disconnected. In this rush, the simple practice of mindfulness offers a powerful antidote—a way to reclaim our presence, focus, and joy in everyday life.

Mindfulness isn't about escaping reality; it's about fully embracing each moment with intention and awareness. It's about finding calm amid chaos, and clarity in confusion.

That's why, for this issue of *Simplify Magazine*, we've chosen to explore the theme of "Mindfulness." We believe that, by cultivating mindfulness, we can live more intentionally, connect more deeply with others, and find a greater sense of both peace and fulfillment.

In this issue, you'll discover a range of articles, from practical techniques for training your attention to insightful reflections on the nature of mindful living. Our contributors bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their topics. They include leaders in mindfulness education, professors, psychologists, best-selling authors, and experts in intentional living.

Each article offers practical advice, unique perspectives, and personal stories to help you incorporate mindfulness into your daily life. You will find discussions on the importance of being present, strategies

for managing the mind's negativity bias, and the benefits of mindful consumption. You'll also explore how mindfulness can enhance everyday activities, such as reading, and the deep connection between mindfulness and gratitude.

As you read through this issue, take your time. Let the insights and ideas sink in, and consider how they might apply to your own life. Mindfulness is a journey, not a destination, and each small step you take can make a significant difference.

With you on this journey,

Joshua Becker, founder of Simplify Magazine

What Is Mindfulness? (It's Not What You Think It Is)

Danny Penman



Mindfulness may have become mainstream, but it is often misunderstood.

In 2010, when Mark Williams and I were trying to come up with the title for our book, *Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, we were met with blank incomprehension. Almost everyone would say, “You can’t call a book ‘Mindfulness.’ Nobody knows what it is. Nobody will read it.”

Since then, the world has moved on. Lots of people have heard about mindfulness, and our book has sold two million copies. But the concept itself remains equally misunderstood. Many people feel that they haven’t quite grasped the idea because it seems so deceptively simple (this might be because the concept itself is easy to understand but the actual state of mind is difficult to cultivate for more than a few seconds at a time).

Mindfulness is, quite simply, full conscious awareness. It is paying full attention to whatever thoughts, feelings, and emotions are flowing through your mind, body, and breath without judging or criticizing them in any way. It is being aware of whatever is happening in the present moment, without being trapped in the past by distressing memories or worrying about the future. It is living *in* the moment, not *for* the moment.

Mindfulness can also be understood by what it is not. It is not a religion. Nor is it inherently mystical or spiritual and certainly not a

purely Buddhist practice. The Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome practiced it and may have discovered it independently of the Buddhists. It was also practiced by early Christians but progressively fell out of use within Christianity.

Although mindfulness is often used by the religious or spiritual to clarify the mind, and to prepare it to embrace the infinite, it is not an inherently religious practice. This is why prominent atheists, such as Sam Harris, are happy to meditate because of the clarity of mind it engenders. It is simply a tool for reconnecting with life, for embracing the ebb and flow of the world, and for coming to a greater understanding and acceptance of life's flux.

For these secular reasons, the main thrust of my work is to help people gain relief from anxiety, stress, depression, exhaustion, and physical pain. It is said that “all life is suffering,” but I think that is far too bleak an attitude. All life can be suffering if you allow it to be, but it certainly need not be this way. Life can be broadly happy and meaningful, but only if you first get out of your own way and allow it to naturally unfold before you.

Another misconception is that mindfulness is in some way “opting out” or detaching yourself from the world. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's actually about connecting and embracing life in all of its chaotic beauty, with all of your faults and failings.

Many people also mistakenly believe that the aim of mindfulness is to intentionally clear the mind of thoughts. Rather, it is about understanding how the mind works. To see how it unwittingly ties itself in knots to create anxiety, stress, unhappiness, and exhaustion. It teaches you to observe how your thoughts and emotions rise and fall like waves on the sea. In the calm spaces in between lie moments of piercing insight.

Meditation and Beyond

Mindfulness is traditionally cultivated using meditation. A typical meditation consists of focusing your full attention on the breath as it flows in and out of your body. Focusing on each breath in this way allows you to observe your thoughts as they arise in your mind and, little by little, to let go of struggling with them. You come to realize that thoughts come and go of their own accord, that *you* are not your thoughts. You can watch as they appear in your mind, seemingly from thin air, and watch again as they disappear, like a soap bubble bursting. This leads to the profound understanding that thoughts and feelings are transient. They come and go, and ultimately, you have a choice about whether to act on them or not.

Mindfulness is about observation without criticism, being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness and stress hover overhead, rather than taking it personally, you learn to treat them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly curiosity as they drift past. In essence, mindfulness allows you to

catch negative thought patterns before they tip you into a downward spiral. It begins the process of putting you back in control of your life.

Although meditation is extremely powerful, it is not the only way of becoming more mindful. Every aspect of life can be used to enhance mindfulness. Every one of your senses can become a gateway to this delightful state of being. Eating and drinking, and even such simple things as walking through a park and smelling the flowers, can all become mindful practices.

The work of Dr. Ellen Langer at Harvard University is instructive. She has dedicated her life to finding novel ways of enhancing mindfulness and has rediscovered what many accomplished meditators have said for centuries: The key to mindfulness is to actively engage with life.

There's one little problem, though: "mindlessness" is pervasive.

We are all naturally mindless. If we are left with ourselves for more than a few moments, we can easily lapse into this state. And we are generally not aware when we lapse into mindlessness. So we are unaware that we are unaware. We live on autopilot.

Fortunately there is a simple antidote: Pay full conscious attention to whatever you are doing. Paying attention is the key to becoming present, to becoming grounded in the present moment, neither living in the past nor worrying about the future, but simply living life as it was meant to be lived.

And when you once again begin paying attention, you kickstart profound changes that ripple across your whole life. You begin to see the world with all of the freshness, excitement, and joy that you did as a child. Anxiety, stress, unhappiness, and exhaustion melt away in the face of such awareness.

Taking Mindfulness with You

Interested in cultivating mindfulness in your everyday life? Try these simple practices:

- The next time you catch sight of your partner or a close friend, notice five new things about them. Pay attention to the way they move, their facial expressions, and the way their voice rises and falls, with its pitch and timbre. Can you sense their aroma? And their hair? Is it the same as you expected? Do they look tired or energized? Are they wearing their normal clothes? Pay attention to what they are wearing and the way the clothes follow or hide their contours.

Try not to judge them in any way but instead accept them for who they are. The aim is not to judge but to observe. You find what you find. Do they become newly alive to you?

- When eating or drinking, pay attention to all of its textures, flavors, and aromas. Tease them apart and focus on each one in

turn. Then pay attention to the flavor, aroma, and texture of the food in its entirety.

Tea and coffee contain many different flavors, while chocolate has over 300. See if you can sense some of them, and then see how they combine to produce the overall flavor of “tea,” “coffee,” or “chocolate.”

- The next time you are in a line (or queue) notice how your body reacts. Does it take on a mind of its own? Do your arms and legs want to move of their own accord? Are the impulses surprisingly powerful? Do you feel compelled to walk to the front? Is your mind swirling with annoyance or impatient thoughts?

Pay attention to all of the different sensations in your body, the ground beneath your feet, the way your chest rises and falls with each breath. Close your eyes, if that helps.

After a while, begin to pay attention to the world around you. What can you see? Do the people around you look angry, stressed, unhappy, or perhaps serene? Pay attention to their faces and to their body language.

After a while, begin to broaden your awareness to encompass the whole scene. What can you see? Pay attention. What can you hear? Chattering, the sound of machinery or a keyboard being tapped? Pay

attention to the whole soundscape. What can you smell? What can you feel? Can you gain a sense of the air flowing over your skin or hair? Breathe. Pay attention to whatever surrounds you.

Until recently, people have tended to see mindfulness as a practice that is carried out in quiet places with the mind focused inward on the breath or on the sensations present in the body. But the ultimate practice is when you take mindfulness out of the studio, retreat, or home and out into the real world. The “real” meditation is how you live your life.

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Mindful Consumption: Making Intentional Choices

Joshua Becker



We often consider our food diet as the primary determinant of our health. And there is a lot of truth to that. What we eat determines quite a bit the physical body we live our lives in. But our “diet” extends beyond just what we eat.

Every day, we consume countless other things: the media we watch, the books we read, the conversations we engage in, the news we encounter, and even the thoughts we entertain. Just as the food we eat impacts our physical health, these other forms of consumption significantly influence our emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being.

And in a world overflowing with information and stimuli, being mindful of our consumption becomes ever more critical.

The choices we make about what to consume shapes our thoughts, attitudes, and ultimately our lives. And by practicing mindful consumption, we not only curate the external influences in our lives but we can also align our daily actions with our deeper values and goals. Mindful consumption may be one of the most important endeavors we can partake in.

Let's explore how we can approach this concept with intentionality, making choices that lead us toward a more meaningful and fulfilling existence.

The Nature of Consumption

Just as our physical health is impacted by the nutrients (or lack thereof) in our food, our mental and emotional health is influenced by the quality of our daily inputs. But these effects are not always felt right away. The full negative impact of an unhealthy diet isn't felt the first day, but over a lifetime the cumulative effect determines who we become.

Consider this: if we constantly consume negative news, we may begin to feel anxious or pessimistic about the world. If we follow social media accounts that promote unrealistic standards, we might start to feel inadequate or dissatisfied with our lives. Conversely, if we choose uplifting books, positive podcasts, life-giving spirituality, or meaningful conversations, we can foster a sense of hope, inspiration, and motivation. Not always the first day, but eventually ... and always.

Our society often equates consumption with identity—what we own, what we wear, and what we showcase on social media. But our greatest fulfillment in life will never come from external accumulation but from internal alignment. By choosing mindfully, we can focus on consuming what nourishes our soul and positively impacts our life trajectory rather than what merely fills our time or, even worse, takes us down a road where we don't want to go.

But here's the thing: Living with intention takes hard work and effort.

The Importance of Intentionality

Mindful consumption requires us to make deliberate choices rather than simply drifting along with the current of societal norms and expectations. It requires us to show up in our own lives every day. It means taking a step back and evaluating what we allow into our lives, understanding that not all consumption is created equal. It requires us to boldly evaluate when others are choosing unwisely and make decisions for ourselves. The line at the fast-food drive-thru is longer than the checkout at the grocery store produce department, but one reaps long-term health, the other unhealth.

To live intentionally, we must first recognize that our life has value and is worthy of being lived well. And this is not an easy step for everyone.

More than that, we recognize that our life is a sum of our daily choices. Every day presents new opportunities to choose differently, to select what aligns with our values rather than what is convenient or popular. Every new day is also a responsibility, to choose intentionality over and over again. Because if we don't choose intentionality every day, someone else will begin to steer the ship.

The foundation of mindful consumption begins with self-awareness. We must know who we are, what we value, what we want to accomplish, and whether our lives are moving in that direction. Once we have a clear understanding of these elements, we can make choices that support our goals and aspirations.

Practical Steps for Mindful Consumption

Before we go any further, I'd like to offer a list of different areas of life where we can apply mindful consumption (and how to do that):

1. Curate your media diet.

Just as we choose healthy foods, we can choose nourishing media. Seek out news sources that offer balanced perspectives. Follow social media accounts that inspire and uplift rather than provoke comparison and jealousy. Choose books, podcasts, and shows that align with your values and contribute to your growth.

2. Limit negative influences.

Negative influences are pervasive and often subtle. They can be found in the conversations we have, the content we consume, and even the environments we frequent. Identify these influences in your life and take steps to limit their impact. This might mean unfollowing certain social media accounts, avoiding gossip, or spending less time in environments or with people that drain your energy.

3. Engage in positive self-talk.

Not all things we consume come from the outside. The stories we tell ourselves are a crucial part of our mental diet. Practice positive self-talk by affirming your strengths, acknowledging your progress, and

being compassionate with yourself. This shift in internal dialogue can dramatically impact your overall well-being.

4. Choose your companions wisely.

The people we spend time with significantly influence our mindset and attitudes. Surround yourself with individuals who support your values, encourage your growth, and challenge you to be better. These relationships are essential for a fulfilling and meaningful life.

5. Simplify your digital space.

Just as we declutter our physical spaces, we can simplify our digital lives. Unsubscribe from unnecessary newsletters, delete apps that distract rather than serve, and organize your digital files. This simplification reduces mental clutter and helps you focus on what's truly important.

6. Be careful what television you consume.

Entertainment is more than passive. As I learned in my college film appreciation class, every produced piece of content communicates messages to us—sometimes unintentionally, but usually intentionally. And not all television shows and movies are beneficial. Focus more on what is good and less on what takes you away from the person you want to be.

7. Set boundaries for screen time.

Additionally, not just do we need to care about what we watch, but in our digital age, it's easy to become consumed by screens. Set intentional boundaries for your screen time, whether it's limiting time on social media, taking regular breaks from work emails, or designating screen-free times of day. This practice helps prevent burnout and promotes more meaningful offline interactions.

8. Prioritize quality over quantity.

Whether it's the content you consume or the possessions you own, prioritize quality over quantity. Choose items and experiences that truly add value to your life rather than accumulating more for the sake of it. This approach fosters a deeper appreciation for what you have.

9. Reflect regularly.

Take time to reflect on your consumption habits regularly. Are they aligned with your values and goals? Are there areas where you can make changes? Reflection helps you stay intentional and make adjustments as needed.

The Benefits of Mindful Consumption

Embracing mindful consumption offers numerous benefits. It is not always easy to be intentional, but it is *always* worth the effort. It helps us feel more in control of our lives, reduces stress, and fosters a deeper connection with our true selves.

By making intentional choices about what we consume, we can:

- *Improve our mental clarity.* We can think more clearly, make better decisions, and pursue our goals with greater intention.
- *Improve our emotional well-being.* It helps us maintain a positive outlook and resilience in the face of challenges.
- *Strengthen our relationships.* By choosing to engage with positive influences and supportive people, we can build stronger, more meaningful relationships.
- *Align with values.* It allows us to live more authentically and purposefully, creating a life that reflects our true selves.
- *Accomplish more with our lives.* Ultimately, by becoming more intentional with the things we choose to consume, we live bigger lives of purpose and meaning.

In a world that constantly bombards us with messages of more, more, more, mindful consumption offers a countercultural approach. It invites us to slow down, evaluate our choices, and prioritize what

truly matters. By being intentional about what we consume—whether it's food, media, relationships, or thoughts—we can cultivate a life of greater meaning and fulfillment.

May we all find the courage to make intentional choices and the wisdom to consume mindfully. The quality of our lives depends on it.

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Joshua Becker is the #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *Things That Matter: Overcoming Distraction to Pursue a More Meaningful Life* and the founder of Simplify Magazine.

Stop Searching for Work/Life Balance— What's Important Is to Be Present

Janice L. Marturano



Trying to achieve work/life balance (whatever that is) simply adds more stress and worry to your life. How much precious time is wasted worrying that you have not found the optimal combination of work time and non-work time? You do not need to even think about work/life balance. What's important is that you be present for each moment of your life, wherever you are.

If you are fully present for the moments of your life, you will see clearly what, if anything, needs to be done. And you will also see what, if anything, needs to be stopped. When you are present, you consciously choose how to live every moment of your life, sometimes at work and sometimes outside of work.

What Are You Missing?

And what happens if you are not present? You live your life on autopilot. You push through each crazy day, missing much of what is happening around you.

Not sure if that is true for you? See if these statements—often expressed in my mindfulness workshops and retreats—ring true for you.

“Is it really September? It feels like April. I think I missed the summer!”

“Is it nearly the end of 2024? I feel as though I graduated just last year, but it was five years ago. Where did those years go?”

“I feel exhausted at the end of each day, but I’m not sure if anything important got accomplished.”

If these statements feel familiar, you are not alone. When I am teaching a Mindful Leadership workshop or retreat, these types of statements are commonplace among the professionals. Some go even further and speak about a sense of missing a decade or more.

During a recent retreat, one corporate officer shared that he’d had some quiet time to lie in the grass the night before and realized that he hadn’t seen the stars in 20 years.

So, what is happening? Why are you missing your life?

It’s all about noticing your distractions and then training your mind to be present.

The Dangers of Distraction

Most of our day, we are anything but present. We are distracted by apps, notifications, texts, and our own nonstop minds. We never fully attend to anything, even when we want to do so. For example, we want to be fully present for our family at dinner, but we find our mind drifting to a difficult conversation we had earlier in the day. Or we

want to pay attention to the speaker in a meeting, but our mind is busy worrying about something that might happen tomorrow, so we miss part of what is said.

And then we often don't notice that we have become conditioned to constantly reach for our phones, even while we are trying to listen to our loved ones' stories of the day. When our mind is elsewhere, our friends or family members notice that we are not fully paying attention. It feels disrespectful and even hurtful.

Learning to train your attention to help you stay in the present is a powerful counterbalance for the distractions and unhealthy conditioning endemic in today's society.

So, how do you learn to be fully present?

Meet the Now

Training your mind to be in the present moment is at the heart of mindfulness practices. Try these simple steps to begin your training:

1. Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit. No need to sit on the floor or on a meditation cushion.
2. Close your eyes gently, or if that feels uncomfortable, then just lower your gaze to the floor.

3. Bring your full attention to feeling the sensations of your breath in your body—feel each in-breath and each out-breath. There is no need to control your breath or alter it in any way. Just notice the sensations generated by each in-breath and each out-breath.

4. Each time your mind wanders (with a thought, sound, discomfort in your body, etc.),

gently bring it back to the sensations of the breath. Just begin again with your next in-breath. Begin by practicing with these steps for five minutes. It is helpful to set a timer so you are not interrupting your practice by frequently checking on the time.

Each time you practice, you are strengthening your ability to notice when you become distracted and then bring your attention back to the present. Whenever you bring attention to your breath sensations, you bring yourself into the present moment. You can only feel the breath if you are in the present. The more you practice, the easier it becomes to be fully present, using the sensations of the breath to anchor you to this moment.

You will begin to notice more quickly when your attention wanders, and you will know how to bring it back to the moment. So, in the dinner example above, when you notice that your thoughts are enticing you to pick up the phone or start planning for tomorrow, you can make a conscious choice to leave them alone for now and refocus on your family.

This simple mindfulness practice also cultivates your ability to see the ruminations and worries that can cloud your best thinking. And when you step away from the distractions and settle the mind and body into the present, you can focus more clearly on this moment.

In the stillness, you might ask yourself, *What is called for now?* This reflection question invites you to challenge the status quo rather than live on autopilot, reacting rather than responding.

This moment is the only one you can affect. And when you make the best choice in this moment, it ripples forward. This simple practice and reflection question allows you to tap into your wisdom and craft the best response to the chaos of the day. It also has the effect of allowing the stress in your body to subside, lowering your heart rate and easing some of the muscle pains often associated with high stress.

Find a few minutes throughout your day to explore this simple practice, and notice what it is like to fully connect with each moment of your life. It may be just the balance you wanted!

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Janice L. Marturano is the founder and executive director of the [Institute for Mindful Leadership](#), a nonprofit organization focused on integrating mindfulness into professional leadership practices. She has dedicated herself to training leaders across corporate, nonprofit,

academic, and government sectors, including presenting her work at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Janice is also the author of the international best-selling book *Finding the Space to Lead: A Practical Guide to Mindful Leadership*, and her work has been featured in major publications like the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and *Forbes*.

Strengthening Attention with Mindfulness Training

Amishi P. Jha, PhD



The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. ... But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.

—William James

I read this quote from William James for the first time in an introductory textbook as an undergraduate student. Many questions bubbled up. What makes attention powerful enough to influence things like our judgment, character, and will? What degrades attention? How can attention be trained to improve this faculty?

As I pored over my textbook, confident that the answers must be within its pages, I felt disappointed. It came up short. But then I had a game-changing thought that ultimately led me to a career studying the human brain's attention system: *More research is needed!*

Over the past 25 years, using cognitive neuroscience tools, my lab has learned a great deal about attention's influence on many facets of brain functioning. We've also gleaned insights into key factors that diminish attention, leading to performance errors and psychological health challenges. Yet, when we pursued solutions on how to protect attention and strengthen it, most of our attempts failed. And we weren't alone.

In the early 2000s, cognitive training studies using brain training games, for example, proliferated in the literature. But the results suggested that attentional benefits were not generalizable. In other words, participants got better at playing the games, but not much else.

I began to see James's words as prophetic. While the goal of improving attention was clear, practical directions for bringing this improvement about remained elusive.

Then I began practicing mindfulness meditation in 2005. While my motivation was for personal stress reduction, I was struck by how I seemed to have greater ownership over my attention after just a few months of practicing. It made me curious. Could mindfulness meditation strengthen attention?

At that time, virtually nothing was known about this topic, so I set out to explore it. In 2007, my lab published one of the first studies investigating the influence of mindfulness training on the brain systems of attention.[\[1\]](#) Fast-forward to today and studies in contemplative neuroscience are finding that attention is not only powerful and vulnerable, but—in line with our initial findings—trainable.[\[2,3\]](#)

The Power of Attention

Attention is thought to have evolved to solve one of the brain's biggest challenges: There is far more information in our environment than the brain can fully process. Without a way to filter, the relentless sensory input we receive would leave us overloaded, incapable of functioning effectively.

As I say in my recent book *Peak Mind*, one way to think about attention is that it's like a flashlight. It allows us to select and direct our brain's computational resources to a smaller subset of information. We can narrow our sights onto a portion of the page while reading to ensure that the letters and our comprehension remain crisp and clear; or we can direct our attentional flashlight to a conversation partner to key in on her voice in a crowded room. At the brain level, attention works by selectively biasing sensory neural activity so that information that is attended vs. unattended shows a greater neural response.

In addition to its influence on our perceptual experience of sensory input, attentional control is closely related to successful social abilities, emotion regulation, memory, decision making, and performance. Attention determines the moment-to-moment experience of our lives—how we interact, feel, remember, think, and perform. Its influence on all of these functions is why attention is powerful.

The Vulnerability of Attention

While attention provides us with a strong evolutionary advantage for maneuvering in the world, there is one big downside to its powerful influence over so many information-processing domains. If attention becomes compromised, so too will our ability to perceive, interact, feel, remember, and so on. This, not surprisingly, can cause problems in many areas of our lives.

My lab partners with “tactical professionals”—people who encounter intensive challenges as part of their day-to-day jobs for intervals lasting weeks or months. Think of a soldier engaged in active field training preparing to be deployed to a disaster zone, or a firefighter battling blazes during fire season, or healthcare professionals over the pandemic.

We had previously found in laboratory studies that many conditions (for example, threats, social stress, time pressure) could significantly compromise attention, working memory, and related functions. We predicted that in the “real world,” tactical professionals would similarly demonstrate compromised attention over periods of time that demanded intense activity and focus that include negative, threatening, and stressful circumstances. Participants were asked to complete sustained attention and working memory tasks at the beginning of a high-demand interval and again up to eight weeks later.

In line with our predictions, we found that task performance degraded over time, and mind wandering increased.[\[4\]](#) The brain

resources the tactical professionals needed to meet challenges successfully were being depleted by the demanding real-life circumstances they experienced while doing their jobs.

The Trainability of Attention

Given attention's fragile nature, especially under intervals rife with external and internal distraction, what can we do to prevent costly attentional lapses? The simple answer: Stay focused on the task at hand and don't get hijacked by distraction. But this is not a useful mandate for two reasons. First, human minds wander between 30 to 50% of our waking moments. Second, when we wander, we are often unaware of it.

Perhaps a more reasonable approach is to do what James suggested—bring back a wandering attention over and over again.

When I first began practicing mindfulness meditation, I learned firsthand that focused attention and open monitoring practices aim to do just that. This led me to ask how mindfulness training programs comprising such practices might benefit high-demand groups over intensive and protracted intervals.

Our initial studies offered a program that was modeled after mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), with 24 hours of course time with an instructor over 8 weeks. We asked participants to

practice mindful exercises outside of course meetings for 30 minutes a day.

In one study, we contextualized mindfulness for US Marines and tested the effects on attention and working memory tasks over an 8-week pre-deployment interval. We found that Marines who did not receive the training degraded in their task performance over time. In contrast, those who received mindfulness training—and practiced 12 or more minutes a day—were able to maintain or improve attention and working memory over time. These results suggested that attention was trainable, and mindfulness training was a promising route by which to train it.

But leaders from partnering organizations asked us if our mindfulness training could be offered in less time. To answer this question, my lab has been investigating the minimum effective dose for offering mindfulness training to protect and strengthen attention.

Across multiple studies, we systematically reduced the number of hours over which mindfulness training was delivered. We found that we could reduce delivery of 8 hours of course contents from 8 to 4 weeks and maintain promising results, but that condensing further to 2 weeks proved ineffective.[\[5\]](#)

In our more recent efforts, we have gone on to investigate whether an 8-hour, 4-week program called mindfulness-based attention training (MBAT) can be successfully offered via train-the-trainer delivery to

bolster attention. We trained members of specific organizations to become mindfulness trainers by first learning about and practicing mindfulness for themselves and then learning how to deliver the program to others within their organization.

Initial results are encouraging. We've found beneficial effects when military trainers offer MBAT to soldiers, when medical faculty offer it to medical students, and when human resources professionals offer it to employees within their company.[\[6,7\]](#)

Through this line of work, we are making headway regarding best practices on how to train attention via mindfulness to various time-pressured groups.

The Education of the Mind

Since my days as an undergraduate, progress has been made in our understanding of how attention works, why it sometimes fails us, and how we can make it work better. Yet, as I consider the future—where the forces of digital distraction, the attention economy, the prevalence of false narratives and misinformation campaigns, social and economic injustices, and the existential threat to our planet posed by the climate crisis—I realize we have a long way to go. My hope is that contemplative neuroscience will continue to provide compelling, actionable answers on how to best protect and strengthen attention to fuel our collective judgment, character, and will.

Given William James's insights into the phenomenology of mind, my hunch is that he would have found a true kinship with contemplative scholars and practitioners. As I learned in conversations with Tibetan monks while attending dialogues between scientists and contemplatives at the Dalai Lama's monastery, monastic training is an education in attention, awareness, and compassion.

At the meeting I attended in 2018, after my presentation of our research on mindfulness training with soldiers and other groups, I handed the Dalai Lama a gift sent for him. It was a book of poems written by one of my lab's military collaborators, Lieutenant General Walter Piatt. The dedication note to His Holiness said, "In my time as a soldier, I have come to learn that compassion is more powerful than bullets."

Upon seeing this, His Holiness encouraged me to remain dedicated to this work. I was struck by how he put it—that by training the mind in this way, soldiers will be empowered to break down the walls around their hearts that a military life often builds. He ended by saying, "With these walls removed, warriors can become soldiers for peace."

Perhaps if William James had learned about contemplative training, he would have recognized it as the education of the mind he sought.

Mindfulness may be what each of us needs to bring back our wandering attention.

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Clear the Clutter in Your Mind:

Intentionally Changing Your Brain for the Better

Rick Hanson



As Joshua Becker often writes about, one of the key elements of living a minimalist lifestyle is directing your attention toward things that *matter*, and living *intentionally*. Our minds are filled with all kinds of clutter that make us feel stressed, anxious, and depressed ... but we can change that by intentionally working with our minds to focus on the many simple but good things that are around us every day.

As a psychologist, I've dedicated much of my career to helping people find lasting happiness, resilience, and well-being. It's easy to feel good right after you leave a therapy session, go on a relaxing vacation, or have a particularly useful meeting at work, but how do you remain calm, joyful, and connected to others when things are tough? That's a question I've spent a lot of time on while researching the science of positive neuroplasticity, which is how to change your brain—and thus your life—for the better.

Of course, we also need to change the world for the better, as best we can. But our influence over the world is limited. Meanwhile, the one place we always have the power to influence and change is our own mind, including our relationship to it. By growing inner strengths like grit, gratitude, and compassion, we can count on having them with us wherever we go, hardwired into our nervous system.

Mental resources (“inner strengths”) like self-worth and positive mood make us resilient and thus able to cope with adversity and

push through challenges in the pursuit of goals and dreams. When we're resilient, we recover faster from loss and trauma, manage stress and anxiety, and have more fulfilling relationships. As we simplify our life by letting go of clutter and possessions in the outer world, we can build up a wealth of inner resources.

Like every other psychological capability, inner strengths are grounded in the living brain. So, how can a person develop the neural structures and processes that support inner strengths?

Brain Training

Changing your mind for the better means changing your brain for the better. The brain is continually remodeling itself as you have experiences and learn from them—that's called "experience-dependent neuroplasticity." When you repeatedly stimulate a "circuit" in the brain, you strengthen it. For example, if you have repeated feelings of gratitude, you become more grateful. Beneficial neural *traits* are built from repeated beneficial mental *states*.

In a nutshell, you learn to be calmer or more compassionate the same way you learn anything else: through repeated practice.

You develop mental resources in two stages. First, you need to experience what you want to grow, such as feeling grateful, loved, or confident. Second—and this part is critically important, and the one

most people don't do—you must convert that passing experience into a lasting change in the nervous system.

Without that second stage, you're just having a nice moment but there is no healing, no growth, no learning. This is the main issue and weakness with much of positive psychology, resources training, coaching, and even psychotherapy. Most of the beneficial experiences that people have are wasted on their brains, slipping past like water through a sieve.

But with just a little bit of effort and intention, you can help those good moments leave lasting traces.[\[1\]](#)

And here's the best news: it's not complicated. It's actually simple, intuitive, and enjoyable. Your brain operates so fast—with neurons routinely firing 5 to 50 times a second—that you can do this two-step process and grow the inner strengths you need *many times a day, taking a minute or less each time*.

You can work the brain the same way you would work a muscle to change it for good: with lots of little efforts that add up over time. You can trust the results because you'll have earned them. I'll get more into the actual mechanics a bit later in this article.

The Negativity Bias

There is one hurdle to deal with when it comes to changing your brain for the better, and that's the negativity bias. Our brains evolved to continually look for and prioritize negative information, overreact to it, and then quickly store those reactions in neural structure. This process sensitizes our brains through repeated doses of the stress hormone cortisol so we become even more reactive to negative experiences, which bathes our brain in even more cortisol, creating a vicious cycle.

The reason for this? Survival. Our ancestors needed to gain “carrots” (things that would advance their lives, such as food) and escape from “sticks” (threats that could result in dire consequences, such as predators and aggression inside or between their bands). Both of these are important, but sticks usually have more urgency and impact for survival. Back on the Serengeti plains, if you failed to get a carrot, you'd still have a chance to get another one later, but if you failed to avoid a stick (such as a predator), *whack!* It could be fatal, and no more carrots forever.

This evolutionary necessity has led to the brain being like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones.

This negativity bias shows up in our daily lives in various ways. For example, if ten things happen to you during a day at work or in a relationship, and nine of them are positive while one is negative, what do you tend to think about most? Probably the negative one. You may have noticed you learn faster from pain than from pleasure,

and you'd probably be more upset about someone stealing \$20 from you than you would be excited about finding \$50. It typically takes many positive interactions to counterbalance a single negative one in relationships.

Meanwhile, pleasant, useful, beneficial experiences are happening many times a day—enjoying a cup of coffee, getting something done at home or work, snuggling into bed with a good book at night—and they're just passing through your brain like smoke in the wind.

This tendency to focus on the negative can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, as your implicit memories become saturated with negative experiences, overshadowing the positive aspects of your life.

Luckily, we can actively work against this inherent bias and cultivate a more balanced perspective. As I mentioned earlier, when we intentionally focus on beneficial experiences and install them into our memory, we can begin to reshape our brain's wiring.

Taking in the Good That Lasts

To address this problem, I developed a method based on the science of positive neuroplasticity to turn passing beneficial experiences into lasting inner strengths: the four-step HEAL process.[\[2\]](#)

1. **Have a beneficial experience:** Notice one that's already happening, or create one.
2. **Enrich it:** Stay with it, feeling it fully, making it bigger.
3. **Absorb it:** Receive it into yourself.
4. **Link it (optional):** Use it to soothe and replace painful, harmful psychological material.

Let me develop these ideas more fully.

The first step of HEAL is the activation phase of learning. You start with a useful or enjoyable experience of some kind, and there are two ways to have a beneficial experience. First, you can simply notice and focus on one that you are already having. Second, you can deliberately create an experience, such as calling up a feeling of self-compassion, remembering a fond moment, or sitting down to meditate.

After that, you need to install that good. Think of it like a nice song playing in your mind: you want to turn on the recorder and take it into your brain. Otherwise, it will have little if any long-term value. The goal is to allow that beneficial experience to create a shift in outlook, a change of heart, or an acquisition of inner resources.

The essence of installation is simple: *enrich* the experience and *absorb* it.

To enrich an experience, stay with it for 10 to 20 seconds. Make it feel bigger. Notice what's special or new about it. Imagine turning up the volume on that song. As you do this, you're heightening that particular pattern of mental activity in your brain.

And then, once you've stayed with it and really feel it in your body, move on to absorbing it. Intend to receive it and sense it sinking into you, filling any empty spaces and soothing any hurts. Let it become a part of you and notice how good it feels. When you do this, you're priming, sensitizing, and increasing the efficiency of your brain's memory-making machinery.

The fourth step—Linking—involves being aware of positive and negative material at the same time. It is optional for two reasons: the first three steps alone are sufficient for learning, and sometimes people are not yet ready to engage their negative material.

The first three steps of HEAL—have a beneficial experience, enrich it, absorb it—are the essence of learning. You can use them on the fly multiple times a day, 10 seconds here, or half a minute there. And like waterdrops in a bucket, they can fill you up, little by little.

This is not about holding on to experiences. The stream of consciousness is constantly changing, so trying to cling to anything

in it is both doomed and painful. But you can gently encourage whatever is beneficial to arise and stick around and sink in, even as you are letting go of it.

Happiness is like a beautiful wild animal watching from the edge of a forest. If you try to grab it, it will run away. But if you sit by your campfire and add some sticks to it, happiness will come to you, and stay.

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Thankfulness Makes Joy

Jennifer Tritt



Mindfulness may seem mysterious and can be a bit slippery. Similarly to others in this issue of *Simplify Magazine*, I define mindfulness as *the intentional focus on the here and now with full awareness and an open mind*. When mindful, we are attentive and engaged.

We may experience mindfulness when reading and writing, during exercise and while outdoors in a beautiful setting. Also, certain calming tasks elicit mindfulness: making tea, tidying the kitchen, taking a bath or shower, working a puzzle, seeking seashells on the beach. Mindfulness can lessen stress, increase optimism, and provide peace.

During my career as a college counselor, I helped students lessen test anxiety and fear of public speaking through mindfulness. As I've grown older and transitioned to retirement, I've shifted my focus to developing practices that bring more meaning to my everyday life.

I've found that practicing gratitude supports the simplicity and authenticity I seek. And I've seen many others benefit from these same practices.

All About Gratitude

Gratitude is noticing the goodness in life and appreciating it. Gratitude is a spontaneous feeling, and it can be an intentional mindfulness practice. It is linked to healthy decisions and productive action through the recognition of inner strength, connection, and support.

We can seek gratitude privately in meditation and through journaling. Or we can share it with others by expressing thanks and appreciation in the moment or by writing and sending thoughtful notes.

Gratitude does not eliminate the stresses and terrible things that happen, but it can reduce the amount of precious time we spend revisiting situations we cannot change. It gives us strength to endure the painful times.

It is easy to complain, blame, and make excuses. This kind of venting is contagious and allows us to wallow in misery. Negativity leads to inaction, emotional instability, and poor choices.

The survival instinct attunes us to perceived threats and dangers. Training our minds to notice the positive more than the negative requires repeated effort. But it is more than worth it.

The benefits of gratitude include the following:

1. Gratitude improves mental health and resilience.

2. Gratitude fosters optimism.
3. Attending to the positives in our lives strengthens our resolve to face fears and overcome challenges.
4. We increase confidence and hope through gratitude.

Gratitude as a Mindfulness Practice

Practicing gratitude enables us to recognize the abundance of goodness. Engaging in the following activities spotlights the wonderful and unique moments in addition to the major life events and accomplishments.

1. Begin the day with gratitude.

Think of at least three things from yesterday for which you are grateful. Were there happy surprises? Did you see something beautiful or interesting? What did you accomplish, or what difficult task, meeting, or conversation did you manage? What kindness did you extend or receive?

This will set the tone for a positive start to the day.

Each morning, coffee in hand, my husband and I talk about the best things that happened the previous day. We discern and describe the

meaningful moments. It's enlightening to hear the other's perspective of daily highlights. It deepens our marriage and improves communication.

2. Use a gratitude jar.

Keeping notes on what you're thankful for in a gratitude jar is an uncomplicated yet powerful practice. It requires only a large jar, slips of paper, and a pen. It can be a group effort for couples and families.

Keep the jar in a private place you regularly pass in your home. Write short notes about things for which you are grateful: events, interactions, kindnesses, activities, pleasures. Write as the urge strikes. There are no set goals about how often or how much to write.

At the end of the year, open and read each note and reminisce about the events described. Use the notes to recognize the themes of your gratitude.

These themes can frame your thinking about goals for the new year. How can you invite more of the experiences you value? How do you wish to prioritize your precious time? What new activities do you want to explore?

The jar my husband and I use is attractive, as are the multi-colored slips of paper as they begin to accumulate. Our gratitude jar themes include time with family and friends, private moments at home,

health and wellness, giving and helping others, nature, new adventures, and achievements.

3. Journal your thoughts.

Writing is a private, personal practice of reflection. Find the format and frequency that feels right for you. Write in a journal or notebook, maintain an electronic document, or use an application on your phone.

I make notes each day in my calendar and type regularly in a yearly document. I find it helpful to review the entries every few months. Occasionally I look back to previous years.

Themes, repeated challenges, and effective remedies and solutions emerge. These insights support growth. I challenge myself to dig deeper and find more for which to be grateful.

4. Use a lens of gratitude.

In moments of overwhelm, take a moment to intentionally adjust your focus to your strengths, assets, and blessings. There is an incredible amount of power in this well-timed pause. Using a lens of gratitude to view the world improves mood and increases determination and perseverance.

As I intentionally bring to mind the positive things in my life, I notice subtle refinement in my inner dialogue. I am more aware of the tendency to speak to myself negatively or critically and can stop those unhelpful thoughts before they spiral. I have more patience and an increased ability to avoid overreacting. I strive to respond thoughtfully, with empathy and sincerity. When I slip up, I try again. I aim to extend tolerance and kindness to myself as well as family, friends, and the strangers who cut me off in traffic or block my path in the grocery store.

Walking my path with gratitude, I feel more comfortable making choices and decisions, and more confident about communicating my needs, feelings, and thoughts.

5. Develop a minimalist lifestyle.

When we own fewer things and carry less baggage, we are better able to recognize the gifts of each day.

My minimalist lifestyle has evolved over the years. I've not only decluttered every area of my home, but I've also examined my thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs. I've cleared the crowded mental space of shame, blame, regret, and stagnancy. I've been able to heal, forgive, release, and rebuild.

With a clearer view and broader perspective, I see and appreciate moments and events for the gifts that they are as they are happening.

Gratitude as a daily mindfulness practice has progressively upgraded the quality of my life.

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How to Enjoy Reading More

Anne Bogel



Reading is personal. Readers may be united by the love of great books, but the individual books we love and the reasons we love them vary wildly. If you love books, rest assured of this: your reading life doesn't look exactly like anyone else's.

I say this with confidence because—thanks to my job as Modern Mrs. Darcy Book Club founder and host of the podcast *What Should I Read Next?*—I've talked to thousands of readers over the years about books and reading. Some have been utterly delighted with their reading lives; others came to me seeking help with the role reading played (or didn't play) in their lives.

From these conversations I've learned that those who are deeply satisfied with their reading lives hold certain things in common. Readers who have vibrant reading lives—ones that enrich their experience and bring them joy—have developed a certain set of skills, whether or not they intentionally set out to learn them.

The importance of these skills may not be immediately obvious to those who haven't yet learned them, but thankfully they're simple to implement. If you'd like to enjoy your own recreational reading more (or more often), these tips from the many readers who have learned to do exactly that may help.

Begin with your purpose in mind.

When happy readers are deciding what to read next, they ask themselves what kind of reading experience they're seeking. Maybe they'd like to learn something; maybe they'd prefer to be entertained. Maybe they want to become a better writer or gardener or pet owner, or learn to think more deeply on a topic that interests them, or read a loved one's favorite book for the purpose of connecting with them on a different level, or just escape into another world for a bit.

When we ask ourselves what we want to read, or what kind of reading experience we want to have, there are no wrong answers. But it's important to ask the question, because this prompts us to articulate and clarify our expectations. This simple process skyrockets our chances of readerly satisfaction, and shields us from disappointment should our unarticulated expectations go unmet.

Ask yourself: during any given reading session, are you reading for edification, or knowledge, or because you want to enjoy a good story? These are just a few of the reasons you could pick up a book. Next time, before you sit down and read (or choose the next book you intend to read), take a moment to check in with yourself and determine your purpose.

For some readers what I'm about to say will seem obvious, but for others it will come as a revelation: if you've carved out an hour for pleasure reading, *you need to choose a book that is a pleasure for you to read.*

This process of assessing your purpose doesn't have to be formal, joyless, or time consuming. Frame it as a quick check-in: What are you in the mood for? What do you need right now? What book might suit that purpose? Then move forward with your purpose in mind.

Identify your taste.

But Anne, you say, how do I know if a book is going to be a pleasure to read?

Great question; I'm glad you asked. You can't know, not with 100% certainty, but you can have a pretty good idea. Readers who have satisfying reading lives know what they like to read, and can articulate it, if only to themselves. This is important because, while different readers may share the love of reading, the specific books they love vary greatly.

So let's figure out what kind of books you love!

To be clear, there are plenty of good reasons to read books you *don't* enjoy. Some of the most formative reading experiences, profound personal insights, and best literary discussions happen with books that were all wrong for us. But we're talking about reading for enjoyment—and so when you have, say, a free hour on a Sunday afternoon, and you want to curl up in your favorite armchair with a good book, you need to know what kind of book you would actually enjoy reading right then. Not a book you *should* like, something you

should read, or you feel you *should have read* by now. But a book that's to your taste: one that's exactly right for you, right now.

Identifying your unique reading taste is a process; it's something you can only learn through the process of reading, again and again. By finishing a good book and taking the time to reflect on *why* it worked for you. (Or—perhaps even more valuably—by finishing a book you despised and taking the time to break down why.) But I can offer a series of questions to ask yourself to speed the process along:

- What genres do you especially enjoy? Think back over books that felt like a good fit for you.
- Do you prefer plot-driven books with lots of action, or character-driven books with lots of reflection?
- If you like character-driven books, what sorts of characters do you enjoy spending time with? What makes a character seem interesting to you? Do you need them to be likable?
- What kind of pacing do you most appreciate? Do you have patience to let a story develop, or do you want a story with strong narrative drive that feels more like a page-turner?
- Which is more important to you: a strong plot or beautifully crafted prose? (If you want both, well, that says a lot about your taste and the kinds of books you should be seeking out.)

- What topics do you find especially interesting?
- What places do you want to vicariously visit on the page?
- What are your dealbreakers? I have topics I don't want to read about, and I imagine you do too. What are they?

By asking yourself these questions, and reflecting on the books you continue to read and enjoy (or despise), you'll soon become conversant on an important topic: your own reading life.

Give yourself permission to DNF.

DNF stands for “Do Not Finish,” and if you haven't already, I encourage you to add this tool to your readerly toolkit. If you've chosen a book for the purpose of enjoyment, and you begin to suspect that your chosen title is not likely to deliver that reading experience, *stop reading*.

For a long time I thought the question of abandoner vs. finisher was one of personality: some people are finishers by nature; others find it easier to abandon books that aren't working for them. I used to believe the answer was value neutral, but my experience has taught me that this isn't the case. It's better to DNF: readers who are willing to set aside books that aren't working for them are overwhelmingly more satisfied with their reading lives. They're happier with what they read, and they read more books overall.

There are good and bad reasons to not finish a book. Here are a few good ones to not persist in reading a book you suspect you would be better off abandoning:

- You don't get that time back. When you spend your time reading books that aren't worth it, you do so at the expense of all the other books you could be reading.
- You don't want reading to become drudgery. When you're in the middle of a book you're not finding worthwhile, you don't look forward to reading time.
- Your reading life grinds to a halt. Worst-case scenario: when you're reading a book you don't enjoy, you don't want to keep reading ... so you don't read at all.

When you give yourself permission to DNF, you open up the possibilities for enjoyment in your reading life:

- You're freed to read the right books at the right time. I frequently begin reading a book and think, *I want to read this, but it's not what I need right now*. A funny example: not long ago I had a strange streak where I kept beginning new books on airplanes, only to realize a plane would crash in the first 20 pages. I ended up reading all those books, but not till I was safely on the ground.

- You're freed to acknowledge you chose poorly, and move on. For me, this happens most often with new releases, where I may realize by page 40 that I'm not the right reader for a hot new release I picked up because of the marketing hype.
- You're freed to take chances on books outside your comfort zone. It's easier to try something off your beaten path if you know you're only committing to a taste, not the full 300-page experience.

Invite surprise and delight.

Something I've seen over and over again is that our most enjoyable reading experiences often come to us via surprise and delight. The delight factor is obvious: of course we love books that are right up our alley. The surprise factor is perhaps less expected but nevertheless a key component of a truly stand-out read.

This means readers who decline to play it safe and instead follow their curiosity to new readerly horizons are rewarded with deeply enjoyable reading time.

If you're willing to DNF, you're freed to take more chances on books a step outside your comfort zone. The variety you invite by exploring new-to-you topics, themes, and genres keep your reading life fresh, and highly rewarding.

Crafting a reading life that works for you isn't a theoretical pursuit: it's something you can only learn by doing. I wish you well on your journey.

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You Are Not the Paint:

Using Mindfulness to Deal with Anxiety and
Depression

Angelita Bramley



If you're struggling with depression or anxiety, I want you to know that you're not alone. I've been where you are—trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of emotional turmoil, feeling like there's no way out. It's exhausting, isolating, and can leave you wondering if things will ever get better.

For years, I fought against the storms in my mind, desperately trying to control the overwhelming sadness, numbness, and anxiety that often kept me from even leaving my home. Some days, all I could do was lie in bed, overwhelmed by the weight of it all, wondering why I couldn't just be “normal” like everyone else. The guilt and shame were relentless companions. I constantly berated myself for feeling this way, thinking, *Others face unimaginable hardships and keep going—why can't I?*

It wasn't until I hit one of my lowest points that I realized I couldn't keep going like this on my own. My then-boyfriend, now my husband, gently urged me to seek help. He shared his own experience with a therapist who had guided him through his struggles, and he encouraged me to try the same approach—Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). I'll be honest; I was skeptical. Therapy was something I was unsure about. I came from the kind of family that tended to deal with things on our own and saw therapy as something for only the really wealthy. But with my boyfriend's encouragement and nothing to lose except a few hours of my week, I decided to give it a shot.

This isn't an advertisement for ACT or therapy in general, and I'm not here to say that what worked for me will work for you. But I want to share my story in the hope that it might offer you a new perspective, a glimmer of hope, or maybe just the comfort of knowing that change is possible.

The Palette

One of the most powerful lessons I learned through ACT was about mindfulness—not in the sense of sitting quietly and emptying my mind, but in the sense of learning to accept my emotions for what they are. Before, I spent so much energy fighting my feelings, trying to push them away or pretend they didn't exist. But that only seemed to make them stronger, like quicksand pulling me down the more I struggled.

My therapist introduced me to a concept that was both simple and revolutionary: What if, instead of fighting your emotions, you allowed them to be what they are? Imagine your emotions as a radio with two dials, one for the volume of your emotions and another for the struggle against them. While you might not have control over the emotional volume, you can choose to turn down the struggle.

This idea changed everything for me. It didn't take away the sadness, the anxiety, or the numbness, but it made them more bearable. It made me feel like I wasn't constantly at war with myself.

One day I woke up and wrote in my diary, “If my emotions are the paint, I am not the paint. I am the palette that holds it. You are not your sadness, your fear, or your anger. You are the one who experiences these emotions, not the emotions themselves.”

When I began to see myself this way, I felt a shift. I wasn’t a broken person defined by my mental health struggles. I was a person experiencing difficult emotions, and that was okay.

This wasn’t an overnight transformation. It took time, patience, and a lot of self-compassion to begin observing my thoughts and feelings without immediately believing them or letting them dictate my actions. A thought might pop up, telling me that I was a disappointment to my family, or that things would never get better. But instead of accepting that thought as truth, I learned to acknowledge it for what it was—just a thought. I began to create space between myself and my emotions, and in that space I found freedom.

A New Picture Begins to Take Shape

Mindfulness became the key for me—not in a rigid, structured sense, but as a way of living that allowed me to be present with my emotions without letting them control me. It helped me shift my focus from trying to eliminate my feelings to living alongside them. And in doing so, I was able to start building a life that felt meaningful

and true to who I am, even with the presence of anxiety and depression.

I realized that I didn't have to wait to feel better before I could start living the life I wanted. I could take small steps, guided by my values, to create a life that mattered to me.

For instance, creativity is something that brings me joy and a sense of purpose. Before, I would struggle with and sometimes abandon creative projects whenever I felt low, experiencing lulls in my motivation to create. But through mindfulness I learned that I could engage in these activities through small steps, even when I didn't feel especially motivated. And slowly they started to bring light back into my life.

One of the most significant changes I noticed was in my relationships. Previously, I would withdraw from others, too ashamed of my emotional state to let anyone in. But as I grew more comfortable with my emotions, I also became more open with those around me. I started to communicate my feelings without shame, to ask for support when I needed it, and to be there for others in return. This openness brought me closer to the people I care about and helped me feel less alone in my struggles.

Finding Beauty

When you're in the depths of depression or anxiety, it can feel like there's no way out. But I want you to know that change is possible. It might not happen all at once, and it might not come in the way you expect. But by shifting your focus from fighting your emotions to accepting them, by allowing yourself to live alongside them rather than against them, you can start to find moments of peace, moments of hope, and maybe even moments of joy.

Remember, you are not your emotions. You are the palette that holds them. And in that palette, you have the power to create something beautiful, something meaningful, something uniquely yours. This journey isn't about achieving a perfect state of mind; it's about learning to live fully, even amid the imperfections.

If you're struggling, please don't give up. There are tools, therapies, and approaches out there that can help. What worked for me might not work for you. But I encourage you to keep searching, to keep trying, and to keep believing that your life can change. Because it can. And you deserve to experience all the richness, all the beauty, and all the hope that life has to offer.

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Angelita Bramley is a professional artist. She has a story of overcoming anxiety and wants to use it to encourage others. She lives in Arizona with her husband and parakeet.