

Mindfulness and Positive Living



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The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

What first piqued your interest in mindfulness practices? For most people in Western society, interest in mindfulness begins with an intention to get help with a specific challenge like stress, anxiety, depression, physical pain, or insomnia. Clearly, research over the past 30 years supports mindfulness practices in working with these and other challenges, and most of the chapters in this volume explore how mindfulness can be helpful in many of these specific contexts. However, many are pleasantly surprised to find that their efforts to establish a regular mindfulness practice also have broad crossover benefits to numerous other aspects of everyday life. While there is nothing wrong with learning about mindfulness to find help for a specific challenge, perhaps the greatest potential of these practices lies in the many ways mindfulness supports positive living in general. This chapter explores how mindfulness practices contribute to many aspects of human flourishing studied in the positive psychology literature, including gratitude, savoring, optimism, positive relationships, and personal agency.

Mindfulness is often introduced as *present-moment awareness with acceptance*. A challenge with this succinct and accurate definition is that for those new to the concept, it may not communicate the remarkably broad and practical applications of mindfulness for everyday life. For newcomers, it may be helpful to understand mindfulness as *a healthy awareness of thoughts, emotions, and experiences that we can apply to everyday circumstances to live a rich and joyful life*. To illustrate, consider the contrasting scenarios in the following vignettes:

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Danielle's Drive

Scenario A: Danielle's morning commute is taking longer than expected due to traffic. Feeling impatient, she starts to ruminate over several stressors she's facing in her new director position at work. She gets increasingly frustrated with every dead stop on the freeway, worried that being late will throw off the rest of her day. She gets to her office only 5 min late but feels exhausted as she sits down to her desk and ends up spending 30 min reading lifestyle news online to try to settle her mind. She finally resolves to get to work but feels guilty for having wasted time when there were urgent tasks in her inbox.

Scenario B: Danielle's morning commute is taking longer than expected due to traffic. She notices some feelings of impatience and decides to take a couple deep breaths, paying attention to the subtle sensations that are part of each inhalation and exhalation. She notices a number of stressful thoughts come to mind about challenges she's facing in her new director position at work. She decides to let those thoughts go for now, aware that she can attend to those issues when she gets to the office. Instead, each time she's stopped in traffic, she brings her attention to the sensations of her hands on the steering wheel while reminding herself that the traffic isn't something she can control. She soon begins to notice other things, like the beautiful morning light on the nearby mountains, which reminds her how grateful she is to live where she does. This prompts a related thought of gratitude about her new position at work, something she's trained hard for and is thrilled to have in spite of the stressors involved. She takes a moment to let this feeling of appreciation resonate and sink in. She gets to her office only 5 min late and takes the next 5 min to prioritize her task list, feeling a sense of purpose and motivation as she dives in to the most urgent task in her inbox.

Collin's Conversation

Scenario A: Collin is at lunch with his brother. He reflexively pulls out his smartphone to scroll through social media. Collin is half-listening as his brother starts making small talk but is caught off guard when his brother snaps at him, "Are you even listening?" Collin responds defensively, "Dude, I'm listening; why are you barking at me? If you're stressed you don't need to take it out on me!" Deflated, his brother mumbles "Nevermind..." and pulls out his own smartphone.

Scenario B: Collin is at lunch with his brother. He notices the urge to pull out his smartphone but decides to wait until later. His brother is making small talk, and Collin notices that he looks a little subdued. Collin asks, "Hey, you look a little down; what's up?" His brother takes a deep breath and starts to tell Collin about a potentially serious health concern. Collin listens attentively and with a sincere sense of compassion for his brother. The news is sobering, but Collin is appreciative that his brother will let him share some of this burden with him and grateful for the renewed sense of closeness they feel as they discuss this sensitive issue.

What did you notice in these contrasting scenarios? Scenario B in each vignette demonstrates how a mindful approach to a common situation can have positive cascading effects and that a subtle shift in awareness can make a big difference in the quality and outcome of a given experience.

Mindfulness practices complement many of the skills and topics that fall under the umbrella of *positive psychology*. Simply stated, positive psychology is the study of human flourishing and optimal experience—a science of happiness and

well-being (Sheldon & King, 2001). Mindfulness shares much in common with positive psychology, including interests in cultivating awareness of thoughts and emotions, increasing psychological flexibility and emotional intelligence, taking effective action, developing healthy relationships, and facilitating compassion toward self and others (Kashdan & Ciarrochi, 2013). Mindfulness practices include a broad range of formal and informal activities, from meditation (e.g., sitting and attending to the sensations of the breath and/or other experiences), to physical awareness exercises (e.g., yoga, tai chi, body scan exercises), to simply giving your full attention to whatever you're doing at a given moment during the day. Similarly, a number of complementary strategies have emerged from research in positive psychology that contribute to well-being, such as keeping a gratitude journal, practicing self-compassion exercises, and learning to cultivate optimism through noticing and examining thoughts. Ultimately, both mindfulness and positive psychology are concerned with deepening our capacity for peace, joy, and awareness. The following sections explore how mindfulness supports a number of components of positive living that have been the focus of study in the positive psychology literature.

Gratitude

The miracle of gratitude is that it shifts your perception to such an extent that it changes the world you see.

—Robert Holden

Take a moment to think of something that you wanted very much in the past and now is a reality in your life. It could be forming a relationship with a specific person, getting a job you really wanted, having a child, or maybe buying a new home or vehicle. Think of how you felt when that thing came to pass in your life. How easy is it to bring back the strong positive emotions that were part of that initial experience? How often do you do so? It's interesting to consider that most of us are already "living our dreams" in many respects and that many of the things we once worked for and hoped for are now our daily reality, yet we tend to focus on what we don't have. In a similar vein, how often do you pause briefly and bask in appreciation for a simple, everyday comfort or convenience—like motorized transportation, electricity, or internal plumbing? No "guilt trip" is intended here, just the emphasis that at any given moment, there are countless aspects of our experience that, if we are paying attention to them, could bring an increased sense of well-being.

Positive living includes cultivating the habit of gratitude: a felt sense of appreciation and thankfulness for positive life events and circumstances. Gratitude isn't just the social convention of remembering to say "thank you" to others; it is a habit of awareness and an orientation to life that significantly enhances our well-being. It includes the habit of recognizing that things could be very different and not in a good way. Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, author and positive psychologist, emphasizes that the word "appreciate" has two meanings: to be grateful for something and to

increase in value. When we appreciate the good in our lives, the good appreciates—it increases in value.

A wealth of research indicates that gratitude promotes other positive emotions and outcomes, including happiness, hopefulness, increased energy, improved life satisfaction, and decreased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Emmons & Stern, 2013). In addition to promoting personal well-being, gratitude prompts us to act in prosocial ways to benefit those around us. As gratitude researcher Robert Emmons observes, gratitude is important not only because it helps us *feel good* but also because it inspires us to *do good* (Emmons & Stern, 2013).

Gratitude works against the normal human tendency to become accustomed to positive circumstances and to take positive events for granted. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson often notes that the human brain is like Teflon for good experiences and Velcro for bad ones. Instead of focusing on what's going well, the brain is primed to look out for potential threats to our well-being. This default orientation was valuable in our evolutionary history, as it helped our ancestors survive in much more threatening environments than we experience today. However, we don't have to settle for what our default wiring offers; our everyday experience can be enhanced by *learning not to forget* the many fortunate aspects of our experiences.

This is where mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness promotes gratitude because it increases awareness of our moment-to-moment experience and facilitates remembering. More specifically, mindfulness promotes a more frequent returning to the perspective that nothing is missing from this moment and that this very moment carries opportunities for joy and wholeness. The English term *mindfulness* is a translation of the word *sati* from the Pali language (one of the primary Indian languages from which mindfulness practices have been passed down). Scholars have explained that the term *sati* emphasizes three components: awareness, attention, and remembering. Applied to the concept of gratitude, mindfulness practices help increase our awareness of the positive aspects of our experience, bring our attention to the good things happening right now, and help us remember that circumstances could very well be less fortunate for us. Similarly, the concept of *beginner's mind* is often emphasized in mindfulness practices. This means not letting previous experiences or expectations get in the way of what is happening now and having an attitude of openness and eagerness toward an experience, just as a beginner would. Mindfulness practices facilitate gratitude by helping us “see with new eyes” the circumstances and experiences that we might otherwise take for granted.

Importantly, mindfulness can even facilitate gratitude for challenging events and circumstances. A mindful approach to difficult experiences emphasizes openness and acceptance, which minimize the distress we might otherwise create for ourselves by wishing that things were different or resisting the reality of the situation. From a mindfulness perspective, acceptance doesn't mean resignation, nor does it mean necessarily liking the experience; it is simply a recognition that this is the way things are right now. It's acknowledging, “Ok, this situation is really hard” and not fighting the difficult emotions that might be part of the experience. Because we're less likely to be wrapped up in resistance against the experience and our own

emotions, we can see the situation more objectively, and we will be more likely to learn from it and to notice the positive aspects of the event (like a friend's kindness and support). As a result, we can find that there is just as much value in a moment of suffering as in a moment of joy and feel sincere gratitude for what we learn from any experience.

Gratitude Practice Pause and ask yourself, “What do I have to be grateful for right now?” Reflect on the gifts, benefits, and positive circumstances in your life right now. These could be simple conveniences or pleasures, people in your life, opportunities, good health, possessions, personal talents, or experiences you've had. We might not normally think of these things as gifts, but for this exercise, see what it's like to think about them in this way. Take some time to really appreciate these gifts, and think about their value. Let this sense of appreciation for these gifts “sink in” to you, as if you are a sponge absorbing and becoming full with these positive emotions. Then, take the next 5 min to write your thoughts about these gifts.

To learn more about research-based strategies for cultivating gratitude, visit www.mybestself101.org/gratitude

Savoring

An average human looks without seeing, listens without hearing, touches without feeling, eats without tasting, moves without physical awareness, inhales without awareness of odour or fragrance, and talks without thinking.

—Leonardo da Vinci

It's sobering to think how many times we may have devoured a delicious meal so quickly that we barely tasted it or missed a moment of sublime beauty because our mind was busy ruminating over some past event or planning what we were going to do next. The human brain habitually sacrifices awareness of seemingly routine experiences in the present so that cognitive resources can be used for other tasks like evaluating and pursuing opportunities in the future. This isn't always a bad thing; you don't have to take time deliberating about which shoe to put on first or weighing the pros and cons of brushing your teeth in the morning—you just do it. But there's a risk that if your mind is always on “autopilot,” cruising inattentively through the present moment so you can get to the next thing, valuable positive experiences can be missed. What would it be like to look back at the end of your life and realize that you weren't really “there” for most of it?

Our fast-paced, consumerism-oriented culture also puts us at risk for missing many positive experiences in the present moment. Unfortunately, Western culture generally fails to appreciate the normal human phenomenon of *hedonic adaptation*: the fact that we quickly adapt to positive new events and circumstances. A new car, a promotion at work, cosmetic surgery, or our favorite sports team winning the championship may bring a short-term burst of happiness, but the benefit to our overall well-being ends up being much smaller than we anticipated and wears off

quickly. This can result in a life of exhaustion on the “hedonic treadmill,” spurred on by modern culture’s pervasive messages that some other shiny new thing is out there for us to pursue and that more is always better. Unfortunately, we’re not very good at noticing when we have enough, nor are we usually aware that pursuing the next thing can cause us to look past all that’s available to us right now. Fortunately, stepping off the hedonic treadmill and being more aware of the opportunities inherent in the present moment are skills that can be learned.

Savoring involves bringing a mindful awareness to positive experiences for the purpose of prolonging and amplifying their value. It means learning to slow down and fully appreciate the depth available in a given experience. Savoring increases positive emotions and life satisfaction, promotes an optimistic perspective, and protects against depression and stress (Bryant & Veroff, 2007; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Savoring can be applied to practically any experience: viewing a sunset, conversing with a friend, listening to music, taking a shower, or watching a sporting event. Although savoring is most often applied to present-moment experiences (e.g., slowly enjoying a piece of fresh fruit), one can savor the past (e.g., purposefully reminiscing on a happy memory) as well as the future (e.g., allowing oneself to experience joyful anticipation of a coming event). In any of these cases, the task is the same: bringing one’s full awareness to the positive experience to explore its depths, carving out a greater capacity for joy.

There are many ways in which mindfulness practices promote more frequent and meaningful savoring experiences. Mindfulness approaches emphasize a greater awareness of present-moment experience, making it easier to slow down and notice when the mind is trying to leap ahead to the next thing. Bringing a full awareness to the present moment helps thwart hedonic adaptation by prolonging the positive aspects of the current experience. It works against the normal tendency to judge the current experience as being “not enough.” Furthermore, many mindfulness exercises cultivate the skill of sensory awareness, learning to bring a sustained, engaged openness to all of the various aspects of routine sensory experiences. In fact, there is a veritable symphony of interesting sensory experiences available to us all the time but to which we are usually oblivious because we are in the habit of ignoring seemingly irrelevant stimuli. Again, this isn’t always a bad thing, but the skill of quickly and frequently opening up your senses to more fully enjoy an experience whenever you choose to do so can bring more joy to your life.

As an example, I had a memorable experience related to savoring during a week-long mindfulness retreat for mental health professionals. In addition to periods of meditation, instruction, and quiet nature walks in a beautiful mountain ranch in New Mexico, participants were encouraged to practice mindful eating. This meant slowing down the usual pace of eating (even setting down the utensil to pause between each bite) and really attending to the textures, flavors, temperatures, aromas, and other sensory aspects of the eating experience. I was about 3 days into the retreat, and after an initial period of wondering whether I was going to make it the full week, I started to fully settle into the experience of mindful eating one morning during breakfast. I had a bowl of oatmeal and some fruit in front of me, and I picked up a strawberry with my fingers and examined it carefully. I marveled at the pattern on

its surface and its vibrant color. I lifted it to my nose and smelled its unique fragrance, noticing a subtle salivary response in my mouth. I put it to my lips and held it there for a moment. I opened my mouth and prepared to take a bite; my full attention was on this simple experience of tasting an ordinary strawberry. I slowly bit into the strawberry, my attention completely immersed in the textures, juices, and flavor of this piece of fruit. In this state of increased awareness, the sensations were so vivid that I was overcome with a feeling of joy and started to weep. I had the thought, “Wow, I’m crying over a strawberry; that’s pretty weird!” I knew others were probably looking at me and wondering what was going on, but it didn’t matter. This was a precious moment, and I was going to savor it. I let the warm tears continue down my cheeks as I slowly and joyfully appreciated the experience of this simple breakfast.

Savoring Practice Use the following SCONE acronym to savor a walk in nature (sounds tasty, doesn’t it?).

S: Slow down. Walk much more slowly than you normally do, giving yourself time to notice things that you might not normally notice. Imagine you are a curious alien scientist visiting Earth for the first time, engaging with this fascinating new landscape and studying it carefully and eagerly.

C: Consider the context. Consider the context of this landscape, how it’s been millions of years in the making and how it’s been the home of countless creatures, and consider all the forces that contributed to the scene now before you (geological forces, solar energy, photosynthesis, symbiotic relationships, countless cycles of death, decay, rebirth, new growth, etc.). Also consider your own personal context for being here to enjoy this scene. For example, consider your personal health and other positive circumstances (financial, familial, etc.) that made it possible for you to be here now.

O: Open up your senses. Take time to cycle through each of your senses, spending several minutes noticing what comes up with each sense: what you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. How many different sounds can you hear? What’s the most distant sound you can perceive? Can you notice sounds within sounds? Notice the different visual patterns, shapes, and colors. Notice what moves and what doesn’t. What does the tree bark smell like? How many different scents can you notice? What does the grass taste like? Take off your shoes, and feel the sensation of the bare earth or grass beneath you. Immerse yourself in the symphony of sensory experiences available to you.

N: Notice thoughts. Be aware of thoughts as they come and go, letting them arise and pass away without your attention being carried away by them. Whatever comes up is fine: “My feet are getting dirty,” “Am I doing this right?,” and “I forgot to call my sister...” Just let the thought pass by like a car passing in front of your house, and bring your attention back to the available sensory experiences. If you notice a lot of thinking, planning, or evaluating going on, just gently say, “Thanks, mind, there will be time for that later,” and come right back to what you can notice with your senses.

E: Enjoy this moment! Take your time. Be grateful for the experience. Be appreciative that you're alive and aware. Often the mind is busy making judgments about what's not right and looking for something better. What's just right about this moment? Consider that in the most important ways, nothing is missing. Look for the joy available in this moment. Appreciate it, savor it, prolong it, and enjoy it.

To learn more about research-based strategies for practicing savoring, visit www.mybestself101.org/savoring.

Optimism

For myself I am an optimist--it does not seem to be much use being anything else.
—Winston Churchill

Optimism has been a topic of study for decades in the positive psychology literature (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 1990). Optimists fare better than pessimists on a broad range of outcomes, including immune system functioning, longevity, and the ability to cope with difficult circumstances (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Sharot, 2011). A simple definition of optimism is the expectation of positive outcomes: looking for the silver lining in a cloud, seeing the glass as half full, and feeling good about one's future and the future of the world. A potential concern with this simple view of optimism is that it can often feel naive—a kind of “Pollyanna” perspective that ignores the challenges and suffering that are part of real life. Does optimism require burying one's head in the sand with regard to difficult thoughts, emotions, and experiences?

Mindful optimism emphasizes the ability and willingness to observe the entire inner landscape of thoughts and feelings (whether perceived as positive or negative) and to choose the perspective and subsequent action that maximizes one's well-being. It's not ignoring or denying the negative; it's being aware of the negative while nurturing positive thought patterns, because that makes for a better life. Rather than resisting or avoiding reality, optimism simply means emphasizing the perspective that promotes growth and positive living.

Consider the analogy of your mind as a stage. All kinds of thoughts make their way across the stage of your awareness, like actors competing for attention. Try as you might, you often can't control what wanders out there, but as the director, you *can* control where you shine the spotlight of your attention. And interestingly, the thoughts that get more of the spotlight grow and start to crowd out the thoughts that you don't feed with your attention. We could say that optimism is skillfully directing the spotlight of your attention to grow those thoughts and feelings that maximize your well-being while not feeding the negative thoughts with your attention or resistance.

Mindfulness practices promote optimism in a number of ways. One way is that practicing acceptance of challenging emotions paradoxically allows them to decrease on their own. As noted previously, acceptance in this context means

awareness of one's current reality, without denying or resisting it. In the midst of a challenge, this means acknowledging, for example, "Wow, this is really hard. I'm feeling really discouraged right now." During a difficult experience, it's normal to think "I don't want to feel this way," and we often use considerable energy trying to ignore, suppress, or resist the emotional experience. In the mind as a stage analogy, it would be like trying to push the undesirable actors to the background or hiding them behind a curtain. However, psychologist Christopher Germer humorously observes that when we try to resist difficult emotions, they go to the basement and lift weights, coming back stronger than before. A mindful acceptance of difficult thoughts, emotions, and experiences relieves us from an emotional wrestling match we can't win and frees us up to see and cultivate the positive aspects of our circumstances.

Similarly, mindfulness promotes the noticing of unhelpful thoughts before they carry us down a pessimistic spiral. Shakespeare's Hamlet observed, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Clearly, our thoughts shape our perceptions of an experience. Being able to observe one's thoughts without being carried away by the accompanying emotional narrative allows one to view an experience with greater perspective. It also makes it easier to see that there are many ways to view and interpret an experience, and because of the brain's default negativity bias (being Velcro for bad experiences), usually that means we open ourselves up to seeing more of the positives. As a result, people who practice mindfulness are more likely to have an optimistic worldview and experience a greater sense of ease and well-being.

Neuroscience research is beginning to reveal what's going on in the brain that may account for increases in optimism and well-being among mindfulness practitioners (Taren et al., 2015; Taren, Creswell, & Gianaros, 2013). One consistent finding relates to the amygdala, the part of the brain that acts like a threat detection center. High amygdala activity is related to anxiety, fear, and hypervigilance; it's a very important center for our survival instincts. It's what helps produce thoughts like "Uh oh, this could be bad..." Thanks to our distant ancestors for whom high amygdala activity played a protective role, most of us have default threat detection settings that are much higher than necessary. Mindfulness practices help moderate amygdala activity to a healthier level, making it less likely that automatic negative attributions get in the way of seeing things as they really are. That's exactly what we observe in the neuroscience research with mindfulness practitioners: decreased amygdala activity, increased connectivity between the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and amygdala (the PFC telling the amygdala, "Hey, it's ok, this situation isn't as bad as you thought"), and increased left PFC activity relative to right PFC activity (a neurological marker associated with greater happiness). In real life, we see a mindfulness practitioner who is optimistic, at ease, happy, and peacefully alert all at the same time.

Optimism Practice Bring to mind a recent challenging experience or situation that's been hard for you. Examples could be a stressor at work, a strained relationship, or a perceived personal shortcoming. Bring to mind the specifics of the

situation, and for a few moments, just sit with all the emotions that come up. Allow thoughts and feelings to come without resisting them, as if you're making room for guests at your dinner table.

Identify the most difficult thoughts that are part of this experience, and write each one down on a separate note card or Post-it Note with a "thought bubble" around it (e.g., "I'm not good enough," "She doesn't care about me," "I'm going to fail at this"). Play around with these thoughts for a while: rearrange them in front of you, make them into shapes and unfold them again, crumple them up, and see if you can juggle with them. As you play around with them, consider that these are just thoughts, that thoughts are not facts, and that in and of themselves they have no power. Their only power comes from believing them.

Now see if you can identify the single most challenging thought that sums up what you're believing about the situation. Ask yourself, "When I believe this thought 100%, how does it impact my behavior? Who am I when I believe this thought, and who am I when I don't believe it? Does this thought take me to where I want to be?"

Now take out several more note cards or Post-it Notes, and generate some optimistic alternative thoughts, including the opposite of your most challenging thought. You don't need to evaluate their accuracy, and you don't even need to believe them yet; just come up with a number of alternative possibilities, including examples of what a loved one or close friend might say about you (e.g., "I'm doing my best with a tough situation," "I choose to be kind," "Others will really appreciate my efforts"). Examine each of these alternative thoughts, asking yourself again, "When I believe this thought 100%, how does it impact my behavior? Who am I when I believe this thought, and who am I when I don't believe it? Does this thought take me to where I want to be?" Now pick out the one that really resonates with where you want to be, put it in your pocket, and take it with you (another option is to make this thought a temporary wallpaper message on your mobile device). You can just leave the other thoughts for recycling.

To learn more about research-based strategies for cultivating optimism, visit www.mybestself101.org/optimism.

Positive Relationships

Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow.

—Swedish Proverb

High-quality supportive relationships are one of the single most important contributors to both emotional and physical well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Chapters "Mindful Parenting," "Mindfulness in Marriage," and "Strengthening Emotional and Physical Intimacy: Creating a Mindful Marriage" in this volume specifically address mindfulness in relationships and family contexts, and the reader is encouraged to explore these excellent resources. As a preface to those chapters, it is worth emphasizing that improving the quality of one's relationships is highly

valued in both positive psychology and mindfulness traditions. More specifically, mindfulness supports developing fulfilling relationships by learning to be more present with others, by facilitating awareness of others' needs, and through fostering natural compassion and loving-kindness toward others. Mindfulness practices help one see through the illusion of separateness between self and others, emphasizing a sense of interconnectedness that prompts one to respond with compassion to suffering wherever it is observed. Mindfulness can also guard against potential intrusions and distractions that often work against good relationships (e.g., technology use that interferes with opportunities for authentic interpersonal connection). Finally, a personal observation through my own mindfulness practice is that I am much less likely than in the past to let social anxiety interfere with getting to know people. Although some of that anxiety is still there in the background, I feel a more genuine interest in and concern for others that overrides my earlier tendency to avoid social interactions.

In addition to the resources provided in later chapters, you can learn more about strategies for enhancing relationships at www.mybestself101.org/supportive-relationships/.

Personal Agency

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

—Viktor Frankl

The issue of personal agency—free will—has occupied the minds of philosophers for millennia. Our everyday experiences and judgments are based on the expectation that as humans, we can choose our responses to circumstances. However, we know that genetics, environmental factors, and past behaviors may influence the range of possible and likely responses for an individual. Each of us has had experiences in which we responded in reflexive, reactive, unhelpful ways to stressful situations. After that, it seems easy to see what we should have done, but in the moment, it was as if we reacted without thinking. Can mindfulness practices promote positive living by making it easier to choose the best response even in challenging circumstances?

Mindfulness appears to enhance personal agency by promoting perspective and equanimity, by expanding a person's behavioral repertoire, and by decreasing the tendency to reactively respond to challenging circumstances. Mindfulness practices make it easier to notice and accept emotions, thoughts, and challenging circumstances without impulsively reacting to them. This sense of perspective allows one to observe the "storm" of challenging circumstances as if from above without being buffeted by the storm and debris. When caught up in difficult thoughts and emotions, it's difficult to see all of the options available to us, and in that state, we're much more likely to fall back on habitual reactive responses. From a state of calm perspective, the speed of the situation seems to slow down just enough to notice the

potentially impulsive response and to be aware of better options. With regard to the quote attributed to Frankl, it's as if the space between stimulus and response is expanded, buying us the extra split-second needed to choose the response that leads to growth and increased freedom.

Early on in my own mindfulness practice, I had an experience that reinforced this sense of increased equanimity and enhanced agency. I was with my family at a church service one morning, and it was during a period of the service where the congregation was sitting reverently in quiet contemplation. Suddenly, I heard an unusual sound coming from the bench where my family was sitting, a few places down from me, near where my teenage daughter was sitting. It was loud enough that everyone around us could hear it as well, a distinct percussive-like sound that was unexpected and unusual for the setting but that also had a vague familiarity: "Tsss. Tsss. Tsss. Tsss..." As eyes turned toward us, the sound suddenly became recognizable as it launched into the electric guitar riff introduction to AC/DC's hard rock classic "Back In Black." My daughter had inadvertently set this track as an alarm on her phone, and now she was frantically and unsuccessfully trying to turn it off. Flustered, she tossed the phone to my wife, but of course my wife didn't really know how to work my daughter's phone, and it took at least 15–20 s before we could shut it off, seriously disturbing the reverent atmosphere in the chapel. My initial subjective reaction was mortification and deep embarrassment. What was my daughter thinking? Did she do that on purpose to make a scene? (she would never have done such a thing on purpose). My immediate impulse was to shoot her a death glare and quickly mutter some stern rebuke (which would have surely just exacerbated the situation); however, I didn't act on that impulse, even though it may have been my automatic reaction in the past. To my own surprise, I quickly perceived that anything I did or said to my daughter in that moment would be unhelpful, so I just took a deep breath and did my best to return to a posture of quiet contemplation. It really was as if my new mindfulness practice had bought me a fraction of a second to recognize the futility of my initial impulse and the equanimity to see and choose a better response. The experience is pretty funny in hindsight, and we did get a few snarky comments from friends after the meeting about our "hymn" preference.

Conclusion

Hundreds of studies support mindfulness practices for managing issues such as depression, anxiety, chronic pain, insomnia, and other serious concerns. This chapter emphasized important benefits in a few other areas related to positive living: gratitude, savoring, optimism, relationships, and personal agency. However, the list of potential benefits of mindfulness is much longer: improvements in attention, focus, equanimity, resilience, compassion, psychological flexibility, immune functioning, and memory and decreases in stress, rumination, and emotional reactivity, among other benefits.

Does mindfulness sound like a panacea? I would certainly not approach it or present it as such. Interestingly, approaching mindfulness as a kind of tool to fix everything goes against some of its main themes of acceptance, patience, letting go, non-judging, and not being attached to specific outcomes. In spite of this apparent paradox, consider the wisdom that comes from the Pali term *ehipassiko*: simply translated, it is an invitation to “come and see,” to put these practices to the test and see whether they promote positive living in your own experience.

For additional resources on mindfulness, please visit www.mybestself101.org/mindfulness.

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