

How To Make Your Mind Happy: 5 Secrets To Mindfulness



"Can I call you back, Ed? I'm in the moment here."

Sometimes it seems like your brain just sits around creating lousy feelings and worries. You want this, you're frustrated about that, you're annoyed about some other thing and the list never stops. And it makes it impossible to be happy.

What would be nice is to have a perspective that helps your brain deal with all of these negative emotions. And there may be one — and you've probably heard the name a lot lately: *Mindfulness*. And research (<http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2014/08/10-happier/>) shows it works.

Three big names in the field have collaborated to produce an app that can teach you how to be more mindful. (You can check it out here: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/10-happier-meditation-for/id992210239?mt=8>)

Dan Harris is the anchor of *Good Morning America* and author of *10% Happier*, where he recounts his journey from mindfulness skeptic to believer. Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg are two of the most well-known mindfulness teachers. I spoke to each of them to learn more.

Now here's the part where I give you an actual definition of mindfulness, right? Wrong. It's kinda like defining "love" or "art." Hard to really capture it all in one sentence. So I'm gonna do you one better...

You and I are gonna walk through the first few steps on how to be more mindful so you don't just sound like Merriam-Webster, but you really understand what the deal is and how to do it.

So what's a good place to start? Let's see what mindfulness is *not*. A good example is probably, well... your brain. (Sorry about that.)

1) Watch Your Mind For 5 Minutes - It just ping-pongs all over the place. And when you're moody, it takes everything so seriously.

Comically, it will act like something is The Biggest Problem Ever, then bounce to something completely different and think *that's* The Biggest Problem Ever. And it will repeat this cycle endlessly.

If this was a character in a movie you'd laugh at them for not seeing the pattern and continuing to take each thing so seriously. But normally you don't notice it. And I don't need to add that this is no prescription for happiness.

When you really watch your mind bouncing around and getting worked up, there is only one conclusion you can come to: "*I am utterly insane.*"

But this process, sadly, is quite normal. As Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman has said:

Nothing in life is as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it.

And research by Harvard happiness expert Daniel Gilbert shows that a wandering mind is not a happy mind:

People spend 46.9 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're doing, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy... "Mind-wandering is an excellent predictor of people's happiness," Killingsworth says. "In fact, how often our minds leave the present and where they tend to go is a better predictor of our happiness than the activities in which we are engaged..." Time-lag analyses conducted by the researchers suggested that their subjects' mind-wandering was generally the cause, not the consequence, of their unhappiness.

Call me "Captain Obvious" if you like, but *this is not good*.

(To learn how to be happier and more successful, look here: <http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2014/09/be-more-successful/>)

Now that you're aware this is going on, what can you do to stop your mind from bouncing around taking all these negative thoughts so seriously? First you need to understand something...

2) You Are Not Your Thoughts - Neuroscientist Alex Korb made an interesting distinction when I spoke with him. If you were to break your arm you would not tell people, "I am broken." But when we feel anger we're quick to say, "I am angry."

And this causes a *lot* of unhappiness. Your arm lifts stuff. Just like your brain produces thoughts. That's what it does. And as you well know, some of those thoughts are *ridiculous*. That doesn't mean that's who you are.

This distinction is central to mindfulness. Here's Joseph Goldstein:

Anybody who's paid any attention to their minds will know throughout the day there's a run of thoughts going through our heads. Usually, we're quite caught up in them and identified with them. We take them to be who we are. Without mindfulness, we're lost in the dream of our thoughts in these mind created worlds and we're not even aware that that's what's happening, we're so enmeshed in them.

You already know this... but selectively. Sometimes, you'll say, "I'm not really angry, I'm just tired." Boom. That's a teensy bit of mindfulness right there. (See? You're already good at it.)

You need to do this more often, rather than assuming just because it's in your head, it's you and it's to be taken seriously. Here's Sharon Salzberg:

I think one of the issues that we have is that we don't necessarily recognize that a thought is just a thought. We have a certain thought, we take it to heart, we build a future on it, we think, "This is the only thing I'll ever feel", "I'm an angry person and I always will be", "I'm going to be alone for the rest of my life", and that process happens pretty quickly.

I look at it like this: "See and not be." Recognize the worries, frustrations or fears as *just thoughts*. They don't have to be you.

(To learn what the happiest people in the world do every day, click here:
<http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2014/06/happiest-people/>)

Okay, we know the thoughts are just thoughts. But what do we do once we see 'em?

3) Label Your Thoughts And Feelings - Okay, you're not your thoughts but they are still there. Give the feeling a name. Label it.

"I'm feeling angry." or *"I'm feeling worried."*

Naming it helps you frame it and separate it from being "you." And it can reduce the emotional component and help you relax. Here's Joseph:

It's almost like a frame around a picture. The point is not to look at the frame, but the frame helps focus our attention so we see the picture more clearly.

In meditation this is called "noting." But is it some esoteric practice only meditators do? Nope. I'm seeing versions of this everywhere and from very reputable sources.

Neuroscientists have done research showing how powerful giving an emotion a name can be in curbing bad feelings.

From The Upward Spiral:

...in one fMRI study, appropriately titled "Putting Feelings into Words" participants viewed pictures of people with emotional facial expressions. Predictably, each participant's amygdala activated to the emotions in the picture. But when they were asked to name the emotion, the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex activated and reduced the emotional amygdala reactivity. In other words, consciously recognizing the emotions reduced their impact.

And hostage negotiators use labeling to reduce negative emotions when they deal with criminals.

(To learn the 4 rituals neuroscientists say will make you happier, click here:
<http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2015/09/make-you-happy-2/>)

Okay, you labeled your thought and it reduced the emotional impact. Good.

But what's the point of all this? *To allow yourself to deal with your thoughts effectively and make better decisions in your life which will make you happier and more productive.* And that comes down to a very simple principle...

4) Don't Just React To Thoughts. Decide. - You have emotional thoughts, you assume they are "you" and BOOM, you immediately act based on them...

And so you probably just said things you don't mean and did things that will make you unhappy in the long term, right? (The word "impulsive" is rarely a compliment.)

Following your heart is good. But first we need to *train* the heart, or we may follow impulsive desires that get us into trouble.

From Joseph's book, Mindfulness:

...contrary to some popular beliefs, our aim should be not to follow the heart but to train the heart. All of us have a mix of motivations; not everything in our hearts is wise or wholesome. The great power of mindful discernment allows us to abandon what is unwholesome and to cultivate the good. This discernment is of inestimable value for our happiness and wellbeing.

Before you impulsively react to a thought (and maybe blurt out something stupid or do something rash), just ask yourself one simple question:

"Is it useful?"

Here's Joseph:

Where is this action leading? Do I want to go there? ... This thought which has arisen, is it helpful? Is it serving me or others in some way or is it not? Is it just playing out perhaps old conditions of fear or judgment or things that are not very helpful for ourselves or others? Mindfulness really helps us both see and discern the difference and then it becomes the foundation then for making wiser choices and why the choices lead to more happiness. It's really simple. It's not easy to do, but it's very simple.

And Sharon adds:

What we're talking about with mindfulness is not in any way eradicating thoughts or annihilating them, but being able to have a little bit of space so we can make a clear decision: "Do I want to nurture this or do I want to let it go?"

Telling yourself what you just did was dumb might be harsh but it might lead you to get your act together. Telling yourself you're dumb 400 times in 15 minutes? Um, *is that useful?*

You miss your flight. Your first reaction might be to take the anger inside you and vent it on the person at the airline's front desk. I gotta ask: *is that useful?*

So we've dealt a lot with how mindfulness helps you cope with the negative. Enough defense. Time for some offense. How does mindfulness boost happiness?

5) Be Compassionate - Mindfulness makes compassion easier. How, you ask? Well, if you faint at the sight of blood, you won't be a good surgeon.

To be compassionate you have to be able to get close to someone's pain. But often this is too intense. It hurts to see someone you love suffer. Your brain's impulsive reaction can be: "PAIN BAD. RUN AWAY."

You need to not be overwhelmed by the feeling in order to remedy it and mindfulness helps you keep that distance so you can be of help. Here's Joseph:

Mindfulness has a key role in the development of compassion. In the face of suffering, compassion is that desire of, "How can I help in this situation?" What's necessary for compassion to arise is a willingness to come close to the suffering and this is not always easy to do. Very often in the face of suffering you don't want to see it because it's unpleasant. Mindfulness allows us to let it in and when we let it in and come close to it, that's precisely the condition for compassion to arise.

Time to round all this info up and learn the most powerful method for increasing mindfulness...

Sum Up

Here's how to be more mindful and happy:

- **Watch Your Mind For 5 Minutes:** Yeah, it's often a crazy mess of thoughts you take wayyyy too seriously.
- **You Are Not Your Thoughts:** If you had a broken arm, you wouldn't say, "I am broken."
- **Label Your Thoughts And Feelings:** Put a frame around them. This dampens the emotions.
- **Don't Just React To Thoughts. Decide:** Ask yourself, "Is it useful?"
- **Be Compassionate:** Only by being able to get close to the pain of others can you really help them.

You're not gonna be the Mayor of Mindfulness City by tomorrow. It takes time. But you'll get better. And something that really helps is meditation.

Plenty of research shows the benefits of meditating but what's its connection to mindfulness, you ask?

Meditation helps you practice the elements of mindfulness in a very controlled setting. It's like going to the gym for your mindfulness muscles:

- By quietly focusing on your breath you see those random thoughts bubble up and you learn to let them go.
- You use "noting" to label troublesome thoughts.
- You strengthen your attention by continually returning to concentrating on your breathing when you get distracted. Stronger attention means less mind-wandering and more happiness.

But whether you meditate or not, what's most important is getting some distance from your thoughts, deciding which ones are useful, which ones will make you and others happy, and acting on them.

When you believe you are your thoughts, it can lead to a lot of unhappiness. It's a mistake. Sharon told me a heartwarming story about a mistake someone else made:

This young woman said to me recently that her whole young life she had thought that the expression was, "It's a doggy-dog world," and then someone told her, "No, it's a dog-eat-dog world," and she was horrified. She said, "No, I don't want it to be a dog-eat-dog world! I want it to be a doggy-dog world!"

See the thoughts, don't be the thoughts. Label'em. And then decide if they're useful. If they make your life better, if they're compassionate, then the answer is yes.

If you're mindful, it *can* be a doggy-dog world.

