



## MINDFULNESS WITHOUT MEDITATION

SOME "EVERYDAY" PRACTICES FOR EXCEPTIONAL MENTAL EFFECTIVENESS AND WELL-BEING

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BEING AT “OUR BEST”

It is evident that being “at our best” is not merely a function of the skills, knowledge and experience that we have to be excellent at what we do. While these certainly are necessary, they don't in themselves lead to us being at our best moment by moment. Being at our best is a function of our being able to bring the appropriate parts of the above to bear at the appropriate moment. When such moments are stressful, we may “forget” what part of what we know best serves the moment and instead demonstrate actions that come from “old reactive patterns”. Such patterns may, in turn, have egoic roots which lead to more or less sympathetic nervous system (“SNS”) activation and concomitant allostatic load (Baethge, Vahle-Hinz, & Rigotti, 2020; Porges, Doussard - Roosevelt, & Maiti, 1994). At such times, we are likely to “forget” our resources and act on “autopilot”, which is fine if the autopilot takes us where we actually want to go, but for many of us this leads to sub-optimal reactions.

In order to be at our best in such situations, particularly when we may not yet be “unconsciously skilled” with the subject matter, we need to find ways to bring and keep our resources online in progressively more situations. This could be said to be a function of “4 mental balances” as described in this paper, namely: **Motivational** (being clear about who we are and what we care most about (context by context), **Cognitive** (seeing things as they are rather than as the mind may project in the moment – knowing ones own patterns of “distraction”, including the stories we tell ourselves that we hold to be absolutely true), **Attentional** (being able to redirect attention towards what we care about rather than what we “don't want”) and **Emotional** (being able to use emotional information for our and other's benefit rather than simply being “swept along” by emotion – quoting Ekman (2004), recognising the “spark before the flame”).

Cultivating the 4 balances is not only about “formal” mindfulness practice. It can be inferred that the processes of “experience dependent neuroplasticity” can help us to learn how to be mentally effective through intentional practices of remembering and bringing our “best selves” to everyday situations. Once the supporting neural structures are strengthened through practice, then these can support our ability to be fully present, resourceful, and capable in the higher pressure / risk situations which may arise in everyday contexts.

## 1.2 PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

All of the “4 balances” are important and are really about our ability to “manage” our attention, keeping it directed towards our various resources. These resources can include our goals, motivations, aspirations, skills, psychological resources, things we can remember in the moment that help us be at our best, relationships and people and other more systemic / environmental resources. We all, in theory, have far more “resources” available to us than we use in the “moment-of-choice”. Not because we are unable to, but because we fail to bring them back to mind when needed.

In this paper, we have set out some tips for training the management of attention in everyday life and workplace situations. These practice tips help us better ensure our attention remains “on target” when things get more difficult. These practices can be regarded as supplementary to the “formal” practice (mindfulness practice), or, if done with intention, as practices in themselves in service of your success and well-being!

Remember that the intention of the work done in the “mental gymnasium” of formal practice is to be able to be mentally more fit to approach ones work and life with all its “busyness”. In other words, to paraphrase Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), to make optimal choices of attention and action in the midst of the “full catastrophe” of our work and life. This mental fitness correlates with strength and activity in neural circuits that are implicated in attentional management, orientation to goals / values / aspirations and what psychologists and neuroscientists call “executive functioning”.

Each time we bring intentionally conscious attention to our everyday experience we are actually “doing” the practice, and thereby strengthening this “neural infrastructure”. In this way, little by little, day by day, we strengthen our impulse and attention control, emotional awareness and regulation, resilience, creativity and, consequentially, well-being and success.

It is important to note that none of the practices below are, normally, a “quick fix”. Committing to the practices will, however, improve the likelihood of you being able to remain more resourceful in more contexts of your work over time.

## 2 MINDFULNESS WITHOUT MEDITATION - INFORMAL PRACTICES FOR SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE

It can be inferred that the 4 balances, in essence, is a function of “mindfulness”.

### 2.1 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF MINDFULNESS

Competence with the “4 Balances” is a function of mindfulness. It is mindfulness that allows us to keep our attention focussed on what we really care about (our aspirations, goals and values) together with the resources we have that may serve these. At the same time, attention is rebalanced from focus on problems and anxieties towards what we can actually do that serves goals and aspirations. If nothing can be usefully done, these practices help us to accept this reality and to move on with things that can be done (maybe related to different goals and aspirations), thereby managing mental and behavioural resources optimally.

For the purpose of this paper, we define Mindfulness as :

1. **Immediate awareness:** Awareness of what is happening in the mind (thoughts) and body (emotions), in a moment, without **immediate** resistance or reaction,
2. **Peripheral awareness (or “self-remembering”):** In the next moment, bringing back to mind “what is skilful or “useful” (ones goals, values, aspirations, skills, commitments, knowledge / experience and other internal / external resources, etc)
3. **Self-redirection:** The ability to redirect attention as appropriate, and taking appropriate, called for, action.

Apart from the formal practices of mindfulness meditation, or if the formal practice doesn't “agree with you”, you might try some of the following *informal* practices. Any time we, as an **intentional practice**, direct our attention on purpose, to a present moment (normally sensory) experience, without automatic, unnoticed, reaction or judgment of that experience (which, by definition, requires dipping into and drawing from the memory of past experience), we are, *de-facto*, practicing mindfulness. It can be inferred that we are thereby **strengthening the very same neural circuitry** that supports your ability to both **focus on what you choose and have it be the “right thing”** for you.

## 3 SOME TYPES OF PRACTICE

We identify 4 main types of practice :

- **Self-Reflection Practices** : This practice involves recalling, after the event, behaviours, thoughts and feelings that occurred over a past period (e.g. the past hour, day or week), particularly where these were either constructive or unconstructive in relation to the context. These practices create insight through reflection on what happened, contemplating consequences and trajectories, triggers and learning. Sometimes, these practices can involve bringing back an experience from the past and allowing it to be relived while we observe our reactions in the moment.

It can be useful to write down the key elements of such reflections in the form of a journal. Some examples of such journals are provided on the LMS.

- **Self-Observation Practices** : these generally require more self-awareness than reflective practices. The idea with these practices is to notice, in the moment, that we have been triggered into either a negative, or, indeed, a positive thought, emotion or behaviour. Once we are aware of being “in it” we can then observe our reactions and ask some simple questions about what is happening, what we are thinking, feeling and doing. If the experience is negative and taking us away from what we **really** want, then we can choose to come “back to our senses” and re-orient our mind and then our behaviour back to what is called for relative to the goal. If we catch ourselves doing, thinking or feeling something which is on track with our goal, particularly where we have replaced an unskillful thought or action with a skillful one, we go through a similar in the moment reflection. We also allow the positive feelings and experience to “sink in”. This builds self-efficacy and overcomes our negativity bias.
- **Self-Remembering Practices**: These practices both strengthen our ability to place our attention at will on what is skillful and also cultivate the mind so that we are more likely to remember our authentic goals in key moments of choice.
- **Self-activation Practices**: The “rubber meets the road” when skillful, observable behaviours occur that effectively respond (rather than react) to the challenges of the moment. As mentioned above, these behaviours are informed by our skills, knowledge and experience and also by our aspirations, goals and values in the moment.

This paper deals primarily with “informal” self-observation and self-activation practices.

## 4 SOME EVERYDAY “INFORMAL” PRACTICES FOR KEEPING “ON-TRACK”

*If there’s agitation present, you brought it!*

### 4.1 CULTIVATING IMPULSE CONTROL

This exercises the mental qualities of presence and patience and provides the “space” for “self-remembering”, cognitive and motivational balance. The practice allows the SNS to settle and for the PNS to come “on-line”, enabling better access to our resources including seeing a bigger picture.

There are several “informal” practices we can do to build this capability over time. Here are some examples:

#### 4.1.1 Phone Calls

As an intentional practice, when the phone rings, see if you can resist the urge to **immediately** answer it. Introduce a moment of “**pause**”. Hear the phone, notice the immediate impulse to answer and, perhaps, just wait for a just few intentional seconds (maybe one or two rings) before

answering. At the same time “watch” the sensations in your body that correlate with the impulse to answer the phone. There is a sense of “discomfort” that needs to be “released”.

Where is that discomfort? What is it “saying” to you? What does it want?

#### 4.1.2 *Emails / WhatsApps etc*

The same philosophy can also apply to emails / WhatsApp / WeChats and other **potentially** distracting messages. See if you can notice your “autopilot” generating the impulse (discomfort, compelling immediate action) to check the message before you actually make the move to check.

See if you’re able to be “non-reactive” – even just for a few seconds to these impulses. The message will still be there afterwards, and, more importantly, I can almost guarantee that you will still be alive even if you don't instantly “react” to your impulse.

Just notice these impulses, perhaps take a mindful breath and see what happens (you might, even, decide to let a phone run to VM or to answer the message when you have a free moment, later <shock horror>). This simple practice trains the ability, as does the “formal” practice of meditation, to not react to things that happen as though on “autopilot” but to introduce a “*moment of choice*” which is a precondition for optimal responding. This moment is your opportunity for growth and freedom from the prison of impulse!

Importantly, when you are able to put a space between “stimulus” and “reaction”, you can insert, into that space, a “remembering” of what you really want (May, 1962). What is your “practice” for that moment? And then the “reaction” is transformed into a “response” that has a higher probability of appropriately serving the moment!

***How might this practice help you be at your best?***

## 4.2 CONVERSATIONS WITH OTHERS AS A “MINDFULNESS” PRACTICE

When we are in conversation with others it can be hard to remain “present.” We might get distracted, either by physical distractions or by thoughts arising in the mind or, alternatively, we may get stuck in interpretations, attributions and assessments borne of “cognitive rigidity” (Listen to her! She’s always like that! Here it comes again!!). The goal of *mindful conversation* is to practice with “**listening and responding**” rather than “**hearing and reacting**”.

For at least a few conversations each day, let go of your agendas and replace these with the goal to develop the neurological infrastructure of attentional control and cognitive flexibility and loosen the developed infrastructure of rigidity.

For these conversations, practice simply being present, responding wisely. Notice any mind wandering (or being stuck in assessments, assumptions and prediction) and simply bring curious attention back to the person and what they are saying. As part of this, see if you can practice with “*inquiry*” rather than “*advocacy*” “CHECK IN” when you notice you are stepping to conclusions. Notice what the mind (and body) does as you receive data from the speaker. Fully “tune in” to both the speaker and what they are saying and also to yourself and your “reactions” to what they are saying. Notice your impulses to interrupt or judge and refrain, at least for a few moments, from automatically acting upon them.

In this way, you are actually practicing mindfulness. The other person and what they are saying becomes the “object of mindfulness” just as with the breath in the formal practice. This noticing and redirecting exercises the neural circuitry of attentional control and psychological flexibility. As a spin off, you might, actually, learn something new and you will almost certainly improve relationships. Only good things can come from this practice.

*How might you practice with mindful conversations each day? With whom does your mind default to distraction or rigidity? How might you practice with this and what benefit might accrue to you (and others)?*

### 4.3 NEURAL PRIMING – REMEMBERING THE “GOOD STUFF”!

Related to the above, it’s a great practice to *bring your attention to your intention* with a few mindful breaths before going into a meeting or undertaking a potentially difficult conversation with a colleague (or indeed a friend, family member or even someone with whom you are in “conflict”) in an upcoming conversation or meeting.

Reflect on how you would love to show up when things get difficult or when you get distracted. What behaviours would you like to exhibit? What would you like to remember? This practice is known as “*neural priming*” and helps align your sub-conscious “autopilot” with your conscious goals, reducing demand on energy intensive and inefficient prefrontal circuitry (Race, Shanker, & Wagner, 2009) and may be mediated via the very effective mechanism of reticular activation (Saladin & Miller, 1998, pp. 518-519). In this way, if something “goes wrong” and you get triggered or distracted, redirection of attention to what is “skillful” is more likely to be triggered. Neural priming as described here is somewhat related to Clutterbuck’s (2021) “conversation 1” (the conversations we have with ourselves).

Apart from helping to deal with specific situations, this practice will gradually “cultivate the mind” so that the way we want to show up gradually “sinks into our bones” and becomes part of who we are. Our “autopilot” is reprogrammed and you respond skillfully without even having to think about it. You will simply notice being “triggered” into unhelpful mind-states and be able to bring attention back to what you really care about, rather than simply “buying into” the (potentially distorted) story the mind may be screaming at you in the moment.

***What opportunities do you have to regularly bring your attention to you authentic intentions? Practice doing this regularly and journal what happens.***

### 4.4 REGULARLY “CHECKING-IN” WITH YOURSELF (RE-PRIORITISING):

Set a timer on one of your WMD’s (Weapons of Mass Distraction) to go off periodically. When it does, stop what you are doing and ask yourself – “*what am I up to right now... am I on track?... Which of my “goals / aspirations” am I serving? Is it the “right one”?..... What has “hijacked” my attention in the past period since the timer last went off? A stream of thoughts or emotions, a physical distraction?... How can I best bring myself back on track, now?... What might hijack my attention in the next period(say, hour) and how will I respond when it does?*”

See if you can use whatever task or resources you need as an “object of mindfulness”, an anchor for your attention, noticing whenever your mind is wandering off what is necessary to just do what is necessary, right now, bringing it back (when you notice) to the “matters at hand”. This, itself, if done intentionally, is a mindfulness practice, building the “mental muscle” of attention and awareness.

In in life and at work, there are many ways that we can be distracted in the moment from what is optimal. This self-check in practice helps to build the neural architecture needed to stay on track, especially when combined with a balanced diet of other attentional practices.

***What opportunities do you have for regular self-check-ins during your life or work? What distracts you in the moment and takes you “off-track”? See if you can practice with internal (emotions / thoughts) and external (interruptions or other physical) distractions and bring yourself back to what’s***

*really important. Know that when you do this, with intention, you are re-wiring your brain to make it easier to stay “on mission”!*

#### 4.5 MINDFUL “WAITING”:

Sometimes, we need to wait. Perhaps in the supermarket, perhaps in a traffic jam, or simply (and perhaps more relevant to life and work, when we are “waiting” to say something!). For many of us, this “waiting” is extremely uncomfortable and this discomfort drives unconstructive emotions and impulses which undermine our well-being, success and, in the worst case, physical health.

We often, without thinking, react unskillfully to being made to wait in this way (see also “soft rage” below). This reaction can often make what might be a bad situation even worse. What if that waiting could always be turned into productive activity? Next time we find we need to wait for something, ***treat it as a practice***. Simply doing a mindfulness of breath practice while waiting for something (note that mindfulness of the breath is not an ideal practice to do while driving, but mindfulness of the route, the colours and textures, the feel of the hands on the wheel or the feet on the pedals is a super informal mindfulness practice to supplement our formal practice). Notice the mind's habitual tendency to go into old patterns of thinking and simply and gently, bring it back to its intended object, again and again (possibly the breath, or possibly a value or a “way of being” you aspire to developing in such contexts).

As always, notice you're your reactions to having to wait. Observe the somatic correlate and what that is doing to the mind. Telling stories that aren't true about your ability to tolerate the “waiting”.

***When have you noticed “agitation” when being made to wait? Perhaps in a line or perhaps when engaging in a conversation? What was happening in your body? Did you forget in the moment your real aspirations and succumb to rumination or agitation? If you did, and if you didn't, how did you feel afterwards and what happened next? How can you practice with this going forward?***

#### 4.6 FROM JUDGMENT TO “WISE DISCERNMENT” - NOTICING HABITUAL REACTIONS TO OTHERS

An orientation to kindness / compassion has tremendous generative power in at work and in our lives.

Whatever when faced with difficulties in relationships, including difficult conversations with colleagues, family, friends or others; ask yourself how **you** would wish to be treated, questioned or encouraged, understood in that situation. What is it that **you** would need from others to be at your best in that situation?

Most of us can easily answer this question but forget that it's often the same answers for those you are in relationship with. When things get difficult, it's too easy and very “normal” that our attention is hijacked by emotionally driven impulse which serves nothing.

When in potentially “crucial” situations, try just “being there” fully, as a curious, present, patient, empathic and responsive listener seeking to understand the world of the other party(s).

In everyday situations when you notice reactions in you, bear the above in mind along with the “remembering” that everyone has their own challenges and ways of trying to be happy. See if you can find it in you to be more patient, tolerant, kind and peaceful when you interact with others, especially with those who trigger you. See if you can notice and then “let go” of any thought patterns which might, actually, be out of line with your authentic goals. By authentic goals I mean those that exist underneath those of whatever emotion or agitation you may be experiencing in a particular moment.



Remember, the “fight / flight” response is designed to motivate us to deal with physical threats to our survival, not, e.g., to cause us to “act out” because someone triggers us or disagrees with us. This habitual reaction to “ego-threat” gets many of us into trouble because it compels **immediate** behaviours which take us off track from our real goals, again and again! You aren’t (normally) in the kind of “danger” that the emotion you are experiencing was designed to deal with, so at least you do have a few seconds to bring your best self online before responding.

*How is the above practice related to your work or life? How often do you notice (often afterwards) that you have “overcomplicated things” in the moment when all that was really needed was empathic listening, responding and enquiring? What opportunities might you have to practice with “wise discernment”?*

#### 4.7 NOTICING “SOFT RAGE” AND AVERSIVE REACTIVITY:

Related to the above, notice your habitual reaction to such things as; having people walking too slowly in front of you, or being “bumped” into, or if you drive, someone queue jumping or cutting you off while driving.

Next time this happens, **treat it as a practice**. Notice the impulse and ask yourself, in that very moment : what’s at stake here, really. If the answer is “nothing or little, except my pride / ego / self-identity” then see if you can practice, simply, letting the agitation be and manage the impulse to step into an unconstructive pattern of thinking, feeling and, possibly, doing.

If you find yourself often saying “I hate it when....(something happens / someone does xy or z), know that the more we tell ourselves such stories the more we are going to dwell in a less than useful state of consciousness which will have its impact on others’ and your own well-being. Ask yourself what you would love to happen, and then ask yourself how you might show up so that outcome is more likely. Replace a mentality of combat (I hate it when.... I don’t like it when you / she / he.....) with one of kindness borne of compassion and see what happens to your behavioral response.

Remember this often forgotten reality... *“If you want to feel good, do good”!*

*What are your patterns of “soft rage”? When do you find yourself thinking or saying “I hate it when.....” See if you can catch yourself in the midst of such and ask what is driving it. In what way do such aversive patterns interfere with your success and well-being? Notice your aversions to things “outside you” which may be not under your control or influence and, either, let go or plan / take possible and appropriate action.*

#### 4.8 PRACTICING WITH BOREDOM / AVERSION:

Sometimes, when our others are talking to us, sharing a problem or simply telling a story, it can be difficult to remain focused, curious and attentive. It may be that we are more present with the minds attempt to “solve the problem” as above, or maybe we get “lost in the content” or maybe we are simply bored! In each case, the problem may be related “misfiring” or sub-optimal activity in the Dorsolateral Prefrontal region of the brain (correlated with poor attentional management) causing inability to focus ones attention on “matters at hand” (Sapolsky, 2017).

When we do “formal” mindfulness practice, we bring our attention to the breath, noticing distractions and, without judgment, simply “escort” our awareness back to the breath once we are aware of it. For many of us, at first, the breath itself is not the most exciting of phenomena to sustain attention to. Many, nonetheless, come to very much look forward to the opportunity to practice with simple awareness of breath. Similarly, we can practice attention training, as an

intentional practice, with other things that we currently consider boring to us. Perhaps writing a report or doing some research we have been procrastinating on, or simply being present with another person and their “stories”. The idea here is to set the intention to “*treat it as a practice*”, where your goal, rather than finishing the report, doing the research or escaping from the conversation, now becomes a practice goal of noticing boredom or other aversive mind states and simply bring attention and action back to the task at hand.

Know that boredom, with awareness, is simply a learned state of mind. If we can build the habit of full, curious, present centered attention to whatever we are doing, including listening full to others and their and their challenges / stories, we will likely not be bored and are more likely to be resourceful (Danckert & Merrifield, 2018; Hamilton, Haier, & Buchsbaum, 1984).

There is a 2 way relationship between attention and boredom. The obvious direction being that we can more easily pay attention to that which motivates or excites us. The less obvious being that if we pay skilful attention to something it is likely to become interesting to us.

## 4.9 EXERCISE, MINDFULNESS AND THE 4 BALANCES

We are often asked about the differences between mindfulness and exercise. The answer is, “it depends”.

Exercise is a valuable way for many of us to both de-stress after a hard day’s work and also to keep the body and (and mind) healthy so we can be fit for the rigours of the PAID reality. While physical exercise is essential for many of us, on its own it is different from mindfulness practice and builds different competency. Mindfulness practice specifically works on the neural infrastructure supporting attention, executive control, emotional self-regulation, stress management and somatic self-awareness - among many other things. For many, exercise may be done while listening to music or, perhaps, while simply being lost in a “mind-stream”. Nothing necessarily wrong with this, in fact many have their most creative moments occur when engaged in such activity!

On the other hand, mindfulness can also be integrated seamlessly into an exercise routine if one places one’s flow of attention on the physical sensations associated with the activity, rather than being on the “autopilot”. The idea is simply to direct attention to the bare **sensory** experience related to movement of the body, joints, contact with other surfaces (the ground, weights), perhaps sounds and sights (say, of nature if you are jogging), while noticing the habits of mind while you are doing this. Exercise is fertile ground for practice as **sensations** are often immediately followed by **attributions** (say, a sensation in a joint, followed by a categorization <this is uncomfortable>, followed by an **inference** <something must be wrong here>, followed by **resistance** <I want this to go away> followed by an **impulse** <“I am going to stop now”, or, perhaps, “I am going to grimace / roll my eyes / interrupt / raise my voice now”> followed by the **action** <stop, grimace or other “coping strategy” as above>). This is a microcosm of our habitual reactivity to phenomena arising in our world.

Cultivating awareness brings choice to all these actions. Notice how resistance causes you to use “mental process” which are not necessary and don’t help. Relax and release, and then return attention to the actual **sensory** experience. “Let there be, in the felt, just the felt, in the heard, just the heard and in the seen, just the seen”. Practicing with exercise is a super way to work with our habitual patterns of resistance.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

With all these practices, over time, actions grounded in **awareness** (rather than autopilot) will gradually become your **default mode of being**. You will be able to bring moment-by-moment awareness to all activities and will notice when you are resorting to automatic patterns before you miss the exit from the “autopilot highway”. In this way you will be making more **conscious** choices of response to more and more of the stressful situations that may arise day-to-day, being able to better respond to the challenges that you and your clients navigating the complexity of modern life.

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