

January 30, 2020

5 MINUTES TO READ · 1100 WORDS

Mindfulness 101: Paying Attention in the New Year . . . and for Life

By Scott L. Rogers

Share this:



[Download the PDF of this article](#)

Where was your attention a few moments before turning to this column? While you might have a pretty good idea, it is quite possible that you don't know. And even though it's back, right here, right now, before you know it—literally—it will slip away again. Such is the nature of the mind.



Attention Matters

Everything that you do involves attention, and the quality of your attention can be consequential. This fact is so fundamental that offering support will seem to state the obvious. You could not read or make sense of this column without the ability to pay attention, nor could you have a meaningful conversation with a client. You could not even reflect on your own ideas. Attention is a building block of focus and concentration. It plays a role in the regulation of emotion. It is crucial to memory. And because it follows you wherever you go—and sometimes, for better or worse, you blindly follow it—it can be overlooked and underestimated.

One of the reasons people practice mindfulness is to improve their attention, and a growing body of research bears this out. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, writes:

If you do a practice and train your attention to hover in the present, then you will build the internal capacity to do that as needed—at will and voluntarily.

Interestingly, *the very attention that mindfulness practice develops is required to practice mindfulness*. Without this fundamental capacity, you could not, for example, place your attention on an object, such as the breath, and sustain attention on the object.

In this column we'll consider various aspects of the faculty of attention, an exploration that has long been a rich part of many wisdom traditions. If one of your New Year's resolutions involved getting into mindfulness meditation or reestablishing your practice, now is a good time to pay attention.

Attending to Attention

Below I proffer what I have termed **9 Principles of Attention**, which I hope will more fully inform your understanding of mindfulness and its practice.

This is not an article on how to practice mindfulness. Nor it is a scientific discussion of attention, though it is informed by science. In my collaboration with Dr. Amishi Jha, a cognitive neuroscientist and attention researcher, I have come to appreciate the value in making more explicit the role of attention in the teaching of mindfulness. In that regard, I hope this exploration, one borne out of

direct experience, may enrich your understanding of the usefulness of mindfulness practices, why they can feel challenging at times, and how the moments of challenge are integral to the process of cultivating greater mindfulness.



The 9 Principles of Attention

Courtesy of Scott L. Rogers

- 1 The first principle, “**Attention needs an object**,” refers to the observable fact that if you’re paying attention, you’re paying attention to an object. Right now, for example, the object of your attention is this column.
- 2 “**Attention follows directions**” in that you are able to direct your attention where you choose. You can look at your hand, for example, momentarily changing the object of your attention.
- 3 “**Attention can be fickle**” refers to the fact that wherever your attention is placed, it is likely that it will soon wander off and select another object to attend to. Even as you are reading this, you may notice your attention shifting about. That’s what attention does. It’s normal. And, at times, it can be useful.
- 4 “**Attention is nimble**” in that it can engage in extraordinary mental acrobatics as it surveys and tracks the landscape of your experience. The fact that you can read these words and make sense of them while managing a wide variety of internal and external sensory stimuli speaks to its nimble nature.
- 5 “**Attention is a limited resource**” is one of the reasons you can become fatigued by intensely focusing attention, or getting lost in emotionally intense content, and why efforts to multi-task take a toll on productivity and well-being.
- 6 “**Attention is selective**” is why you are able to focus on something very specific (such as these words) and pretty much tune out or ignore other objects in your midst.
- 7 “**Attention gathers data**” refers to its capacity to gather information about the objects it alights on. That information is processed by the brain.

- 8 “Attention is predictable,” and when you spend a little time observing your mind and where your attention is, you’ll discover patterns.
- 9 Fortunately, “attention is trainable,” so that where you find patterns that do not serve you well, there are ways of refining the quality of your attention, and there are many benefits that flow from doing so.

An Education Par Excellence

It’s amazing how useful—actually crucial—attention is to pretty much everything you do, and how well you do it. The philosopher and psychologist William James summed up nicely the benefits of attention along with the importance of training it when he wrote:

And the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.

The study and practice of mindfulness is an education that can improve this faculty (Principle 9), and opportunities to learn about and practice mindfulness abound. A standard mindfulness practice instruction involves placing attention on an object, such as the breath, with the intention to keep it there (Principles 1 and 2). With attention trained on the breath, largely to the exclusion of the many other objects arising in the moment (Principle 6), one concentrates attention and notices the changing nature of experience (Principle 7). And, notwithstanding one’s commitment to the project, the mind will, sooner than later, wander away from the object (Principle 3), captured by another (Principle 5). Yet, the extraordinary capacity to be aware of one’s attention detects this departure, and attention course corrects, returning to the object (Principle 4). Over time, one gains insight into patterns of thoughts and feelings (Principle 8), and, by not reacting to this forever-shifting and powerfully influential landscape but holding steady and maintaining a more observational stance, many benefits can be realized.

Why might the above be useful? Often when practicing mindfulness, attention is treated more as the thing to wrestle to the ground than an extraordinary and vital quality that is largely governing the experience. As such, its fickle nature, expressed as incessant mind wandering, leaves many feeling frustrated and inept, as opposed to intrigued by the mind’s fascinating nature.

The next time you sit quietly for a few minutes to practice mindfulness—or just to enjoy a little solitude—keep an eye out for your attention . . . and enjoy the show.

[Next Article >>>](#)

Authors



Scott L. Rogers

Scott L. Rogers is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness and law, as well as a teacher, researcher, and trainer. He is founder and director of the University of Miami School of Law’s [Mindfulness in Law Program](#), and he co-founded and co-directs the University of Miami’s [Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative](#). Scott is the author of five books including the recently released *The Elements of Mindfulness*.

Published in *GPSolo eReport*, Volume 9, Number 6, January 2020. © 2020 by the American Bar Association. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved. This information or any portion thereof may not be copied or disseminated in any form or by any means or stored in an electronic database or retrieval system without the express written consent of the American Bar Association. The views expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the American Bar Association or the Solo, Small Firm and General Practice Division.