

May 24, 2022 6 MINUTES TO READ · 1400 WORD

Mindfulness 101: Being Present


By Scott L. Rogers

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This month's column is for readers who are a little fuzzy about what it means to "be present," "be in the moment," and other seemingly vague proclamations of what mindfulness entails. So that this discussion translates into something actionable, we'll close with a link to a guided mindfulness practice designed to reinforce the information that follows.

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Let's begin with an important question: Do you find that being distracted or undistracted is a more natural state? Since the mind wanders about 50 percent of the time, an argument can be made for either, and it is not surprising that many consider distraction to be the norm. Your answer matters because it points to whether you regard mindfulness as an ordinary or a special state. If it's ordinary, then it is always available, albeit periodically obscured by distractedness. If it's a special state, then effort is needed (as many believe) to experience it, and sooner or later distraction will again take hold. The difference between these two perspectives can greatly influence your understanding of the purpose of practicing mindfulness and of mindfulness itself.

Be Present for Your Experience

Mindfulness involves being present. If you're wondering what this looks like, it looks like every moment of your life, for you are always present for your experience. You might reply: What about times that I am distracted, lost in thought, or feeling and acting impulsively? A good question. Presence is not an on-off switch. In practical terms, it functions more like a lightbulb with a dimmer. Sometimes the lightbulb is very bright. Sometimes it is fairly dim. *But it is always on.* When it is brighter, we are less distractable, better focused, and at ease—we see things more clearly. When we are distracted or agitated, the lightbulb dims. We can lose our foothold on reality with assumptions, biases, judgments, and emotions clouding our view. While we can't force ourselves to "control the dimmer switch" and be more present (that's like saying don't let your mind wander—lots of luck), mindfulness practices can indirectly modulate the dimmer switch so that the lightbulb brightens. We become more adept at noticing when our mind has begun to wander and get back on track.

In a few moments, after doing a one-minute practice, we'll take a quick tour through three mindfulness practices—[Focused Attention](#), [Body Scan](#), and [Open Monitoring](#)—and consider how each, in its own way, helps us get back on track. Importantly, while these practices are not necessary to be mindfully aware, they

can serve as helpful pointers. They are a bit like signs on a mountain trail that assist you when you unwittingly stray from the path.

Mindfulness

With your eyes open or closed, sit for about a minute with this open-ended instruction:

Be present for your experience

* * *

What happened? At first you likely had a sense of where you were, what you were doing, and what was taking place around and perhaps even within you. At some point you may have noticed that you had become distracted: lost in thoughts of past or future. You might also have experienced a few moments of calm—your breathing slowing, your mind less busy. To be present for your experience is to observe whatever happens, be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and includes realizations of inevitable mind wandering.

If you regard mindfulness as the natural state, then you were mindfully aware with the lightbulb dimming now and again. If, on the other hand, you see mindfulness as a special state, then you may have found yourself helpless as it slipped away, as if this were a problem. Regardless of your view, what happened over the course of that one minute is that your lightbulb brightened and dimmed over and over again. This is what happens all day long, whether you are working, talking, driving, relaxing, walking, eating—even practicing mindfulness. This is what the mind does. Let's pull away the curtain to look more closely at the instructions for three popular mindfulness practice and consider how these instructions are really just useful guides for being present for your experience.

Focused Attention

The Focused Attention practice offers a simple and effective pointer for moments when you realize your mind has wandered (akin to realizing that you wandered off the trail), as you likely did even during the brief one-minute practice. *When you notice your mind has wandered, focus your attention on something you are experiencing in the moment*—something like the breath. This instruction is a gentle nudge that automatically brightens the lightbulb. Instantly, you're back! Truth be told, you never left.

Body Scan

It may also be that during the short practice you experienced sensations in the body—perhaps a tension or tightness, a hunger or fullness, or lethargy. It may have been a feeling of calm and ease. The Body Scan practice offers a useful pointer as these sensations may lead to internal narratives and impulses—when the lightbulb begins to dim. The instruction is to *observe the sensations arising in the body; notice whether they are pleasant or unpleasant; notice how they may change*. Why is this a helpful nudge? Because these sensations (like the breath) are arising in the present moment. Turning attention to them is turning to the present moment. The mind, however, with thoughts like “I shouldn't have eaten so much,” “I've got to get more sleep,” or “Maybe I should see a doctor,” is likely to get carried away by these narratives. Of course, you can be aware of these thoughts—see them with clarity, focus, and emotional steadiness—and in so doing, be

present for your experience with a bright lightbulb. But, as a rule, we become swept away by such mental chatter, which leads to further agitation in the body.

Open Monitoring

You may also have experienced moments of spaciousness and clarity, just taking in your experience. Along the way you might have had an affirming thought like, “this feels good,” or “so this is being present,” or “I hope this lasts.” Momentarily caught up in these thoughts, the lightbulb dims nonetheless. The third practice, “Open Monitoring,” involves noticing such moments of discursive thinking and, in doing so, returning to being present for your experience, with an instruction like, “Should you notice your mind getting pulled away, *expand the field of awareness and witness the moment as it just is.*”

The Distracted Mind Is the Exception, Not the Rule

As you can see, each of the succinct instructions for these three practices is simply a nudge back to a fuller awareness of one’s experience. While no mindfulness instruction is necessary to be mindful, when the lightbulb dims—and we realize it, even just a little—any one of these instructions can help us to become more fully present. And with regular practice of one or more of these formal exercises for five, ten, or 15 minutes, you become more naturally skilled at detecting discursive thinking and noticing the arising of emotional reactivity. As a result, the lightbulb dims less often and brightens more quickly.

Understanding that the distracted mind (no matter the frequency of distraction) is the exception, and not the rule, imparts the important insight that you are always present for your experience. A useful metaphor is that the clouds of thoughts and feelings pass across the open sky of the mind, and not the other way around.

So, as you live the moments of your precious life, remember that you don’t have to go anywhere or achieve a special state to be present for your experience. Moreover, the next time you are interested in practicing mindfulness, begin with the only instruction you need (if one is needed at all) and be present for your experience. When you realize that your lightbulb of awareness has dimmed and you want a little assist, draw on one of the pointers/nudges contained in any of the primary practices. You’ll find that awareness takes care of things by itself.

The following 20-minute exercise (short overview and 15-minute practice) draws on the three mindfulness practices discussed and guides you to more effortlessly *be present for your experience*. You can watch the guided practice by [clicking here](#) and [listen to](#) it here.

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