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Mindfulness as experience

Pause the world for a moment ...

Imagine you could press a button to slow down or stop the world around you. In this stiller world, you could take in your experience with greater awareness. As a result, you could then have more control over how you responded to whatever happened, minute-by-minute. What would that be like?



Below, you will be invited to do that before reading further. You may prefer to keep reading instead, but if you stick with the task, it will help you to make more sense of what you read later.

Activity: Pause the world ...

Take a few moments to imagine a situation where, by slowing down the world, you have the opportunity to do something differently. Consider what that would be like. **Before getting started**, take a few moments to consider your response to being asked to undertake this activity. Use the prompts below to assist your observations and to explore your response. You can come back to the activity on page 7 (below).

Prompts for 'Pause the world'	
<i>How do you feel about what you have been asked to do?</i>	Interested? Keen to give this a go? Irritated? Impatient to get on with reading? Reluctant? Resistant? Something else? Don't know?
<i>Are you judging your responses?</i>	Are you pleased with yourself for having a great attitude? Blaming yourself for being impatient or adopting a negative attitude? Defensive about your attitude? Wary that your response to this activity may be criticized? Or not judging at all?
<i>What about your emotions?</i>	Are you aware of any other emotions, or feelings, at this moment? Happiness? Contentment? Sadness? Anger? Anxiety? Joy? Serenity? Worry? Shame? Guilt? Defensiveness? No feelings at all? What does it feel like to have such feelings: good? Uncomfortable? Don't know? Do you have a sense of trying to avoid any particular feelings and emotions just now?
<i>What do you notice about your body?</i>	Do you feel comfortable? Uncomfortable? Relaxed? Tense? Peaceful? Stiff? Painful? Itchy? Upright? Happy to be sitting still or keen to be getting up and doing something else? Or are you not really aware of your body? Don't know? Don't want to know?

Interpreting your responses to the prompts

The above prompts were designed ...

- ~ To encourage you to bring your attention to what, exactly, was going on for you at that moment
- ~ To bring your attention to your feelings, thoughts and physical responses, increasing your awareness of these
- ~ To deepen your experience of the present moment more fully, whether that was pleasant or annoying – to just ‘be’ with whatever came up.

Being observant of the here and now

Mindfulness starts with being more fully aware of what is going on, starting with your own mind and body. As you worked through the prompts, you may have noticed some or all of the following:

1. That you went through a train of different thoughts and emotions
2. That your thoughts and emotions changed as you read the prompts, responding to each of these as a new stimulus
3. That you wanted to ‘get on with it’, to read on rather than pause to increase your awareness of what was going on in the moment
4. That you wanted to have the ‘right’ response – to be ‘good at’ whatever this was supposed to be about
5. That you wondered if you had ‘got it wrong’, maybe getting anxious or annoyed about this or about being ‘judged’
6. That you were quick to start judging yourself, maybe praising yourself, maybe criticizing yourself negatively
7. That you couldn’t really be bothered to engage with some or all of the prompts, or that some interested you more than others
8. That you didn’t know how to answer some
9. That even though nobody but you would know how you responded, you were not entirely honest, or invented responses
10. That your response was primarily intellectual: you were already starting to formulate theories, arguments, objections, criticisms.

Gaining insights

As you may have guessed, there are not any correct or incorrect responses to the prompts. You aren't 'good' or 'bad' as a result of your responses. They may give you insights into such things as:

- ~ How open and willing you are to 'have a go' and participate
- ~ The sorts of things to which you find it easy or difficult to respond with equanimity, balance and calm
- ~ The kinds of things you are quick to criticize or push away
- ~ Your levels of self-criticism and sensitivity to being judged
- ~ Your awareness of your body, thoughts, and/or emotions.



Reflection: Awareness of experience

- ~ Take a few moments to jot down your observations and reflections on this activity.
- ~ From the list of 10 sets of responses itemized above (page 5), which ones did you observe yourself engaging in at some point during the activity?
- ~ What might you learn about yourself from these observations?

Mindfulness as experience

You can read about mindfulness and, indeed, there are many excellent and thought-provoking writings that you can draw upon to enhance, understand or critique the experience. However, reading and hearing about mindfulness only takes you so far. Considering research findings only takes you so far. The experience is different: you find out for yourself. Mindfulness practice brings depth and breadth to your experience, to the practice itself and to your life and studies more generally.

If you followed through on the activity, responding to the prompts above, you are starting to experience what mindfulness is about. You do it. You experience. You observe. You learn.

The power of the pause

You can be mindful, or more aware, at any time, whether you are in stillness or undertaking an activity. However, the thought patterns, habits, abilities and benefits associated with mindfulness are usually developed through setting time aside just to pause, focus, notice, practice.

Creating such pauses increases your awareness of what is going on for you in the immediacy of the here and now:

- ~ Of your surroundings
- ~ Of your physical self
- ~ Of your feelings, cravings, aversions, emotions
- ~ Of inner chatter, trains of thought, responses, reactions to responses, whether you are judging yourself or being kind to yourself, judging others or bringing empathetic compassion to their circumstances
- ~ Of whatever is arising in your mind and what this leads you to think, feel, do, or want to do, in the immediate moment.



Reflection: Pause the world for a moment ...

Reflect now on the paragraph with which this chapter opened.

Imagine you could press a button to slow down or stop the world around you. In this stiller world, you could take in your experience with greater awareness. It would give you more control over how you responded to whatever happened, moment-by-moment.

- ~ What would that be like?
- ~ What kinds of things might you do differently?
- ~ What might you learn?
- ~ How might your life and your studies be different as a result?
- ~ What would it be like if everyone did this?

Shaping your experience

Although we do not have control over all aspects of our existence, we do have a great deal of power over how we experience it. There is a lot of power in our own minds – much more than we usually employ.

However wonderful or terrible an experience, we can shape how we think and feel about it to some extent:

- ~ by the way we think about it
- ~ by the way we talk about it
- ~ by what we do to prepare mentally and physically in advance
- ~ by how open and active we are in learning from it
- ~ by the way we set up a task for success or failure
- ~ by how we organize our surroundings
- ~ by our choice of who we involve in what we do
- ~ by taking action
- ~ by drawing on our observations
- ~ by reflecting on our actions
- ~ by how we refine and apply our awareness.

For students, this is relevant because it means you can influence how you experience your own study. This is picked up further in Chapter 32, 'Finding the joy in study'.

It is also relevant to mindfulness practice itself. When meditating, although it isn't helpful to try to tie down a particular experience, you can influence the experience through the way you set up your practice. This is considered further in Chapter 23, 'Developing your practice'.

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