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Stay Mindfully Aware

This practice is all about focusing your awareness on the flow of personal energy. There are three horizons of this awareness:

- What's going on inside you.
- What's going on between you and another person.
- What's going on inside another person.

By understanding what's going on within you, you can manage your view of the situation and your interaction with others. By appreciating the way you and another are interacting—regardless of how you feel about the situation—you can take action to adjust your behavior and improve the energy flow between you. By observing that something is “going on” in another person that is interfering with their flow of energy, you can take steps either to understand their situation and facilitate the flow of energy, or bring the interaction to a close if it is unproductive.

Being Aware of Yourself

Mindful awareness begins with you. It begins with your becoming aware of how you react to your day-to-day experiences.

(Bob) One morning I was driving my daughter to school. What is normally a 12-minute drive took 45 minutes. The trip from there to my first appointment of the day, which should have taken 20 minutes, took almost an hour.

I could feel my frustration growing as I saw my back-to-back meetings fall like dominoes. I was then susceptible to being emotionally hijacked by the actions of drivers who tried to edge in front of me in a single lane of traffic.

At one point, when I was behind a bus, a huge contractor's truck pulled up beside me and turned on his signal. The printable substance of what I was thinking was, "I'm not lettin' anybody in—I've let enough people in!" The standoff lasted about a minute and a half. When the driver finally figured out I wasn't going to move, he gunned his engine and swung into the line in front of the bus.

It may have taken me awhile, but I did recognize that I was getting emotionally hijacked. Rather than adding everyone around me into the category of flaming idiots, I released that feeling. I laughed at myself, accessing the practice of Capture— and Cherish—Your Lightness (see chapter 3). So the meeting I was heading to was going to be a bit shorter because of my lateness.

What did it matter, really? I called ahead, explained the situation, and then accepted the reality of the drive and enjoyed the ride.

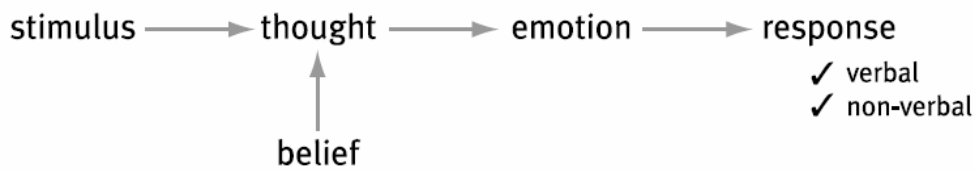
I realized the intensity of my emotion when I had to go back a track on the audio book I was listening to. I had missed most of it.

Staying mindfully aware means stepping outside the forces of the moment and checking in on yourself, assessing what's really happening to you.

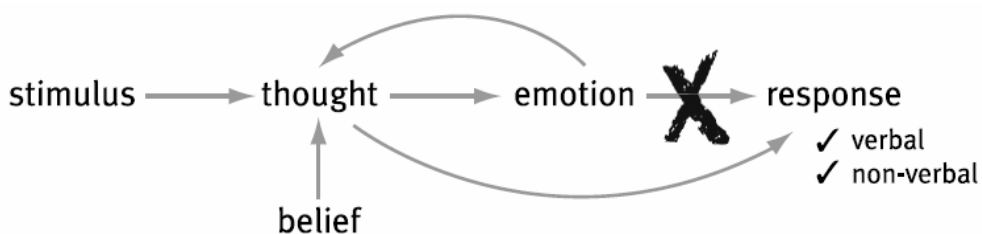
Are circumstances affecting your normal, healthy way of being? Does your behavior match how you see yourself and how you'd want yourself to act in this situation? When you get hijacked, you get bogged down in negative feelings that prevent you from acting the way you'd like to. To find out what's really happening to you, pay attention to your breathing, posture, and muscle tension. Then ask yourself:

- "What am I feeling right now?"
- "Am I still breathing, or am I holding my breath?"
- "Are my muscles tensing, or is my posture relaxed?"

When you're not mindfully aware in this way, you don't know what's happening to you. You are propelled by your emotions. As mentioned earlier, the progression you go through in these situations starts with some *stimulus*—a statement by someone else, for example—that triggers an *automatic thought* in your mind that's based on some closely held *belief*, and the thought in turn triggers an *emotion* within you, and finally a verbal or non-verbal *response*.



As soon as you become aware that you have a strong emotion rising— particularly a negative one—you have the choice to block the path between the automatic emotion and the automatic response, go back to thinking consciously about what’s happening, and decide whether to change your thought about it, and thereby your emotion. Further, you may decide to explore the belief underlying that thought, choosing either to *change* that belief or *reinforce* it.



Learning to change your automatic thoughts is not necessarily straightforward. They can become so automatic that you’re not even aware of them and only aware of the emotions they stir up. That strong emotion is your first clue.

(Bob) A close friend of ours has a teenager who often tests her resilience. She described a typical interchange to us.

As the story goes, while she was in the middle of preparing dinner, her daughter came into the kitchen with an agenda on her mind.

“I need to go to the sports store,” she said. “Will you give me a ride over?”

The mother’s immediate, though unspoken, reaction was, “Does it look like I’m not doing anything?”

Instead of responding automatically, she acknowledged the rather intense emotion to herself and quickly began to examine her thoughts and beliefs. She recognized that she had been thinking along the lines of, “You don’t think what I have to do is as important as what you have to do. You’re so insensitive”— an emotion of resentment.

So she changed her thought to, “You’re focused on your own stuff and that’s OK; we just need to understand that we both have needs and work to satisfy them both.”

As a result, her thought generated a different emotion—one of acceptance—and she responded with, “Hey, girl, I hear you’re anxious to get over to the store, and I’m in the middle of preparing dinner so we don’t eat too late tonight. How can we work this out so it’s good for both of us?”

The daughter now had the challenge of coming up with an answer and jumped in with, “OK, how about I help you prepare dinner for 15 minutes, then you take me over to the store while dinner’s cooking?”

Confrontation avoided; mutually acceptable solution found; and a solid foundation created for future productive dialogue and relationships.

So, by changing your thought about something, you change the resulting emotion, your response to the situation, and the outcome.

Now if you choose *not* to change your thought about it and act through the original emotion, that’s OK—it’s your choice. At least now it’s a conscious action rather than an automatic one.

The first part of being conscious in this way is to stay *mindfully* aware of all of your own states: physical, emotional, mental, and even spiritual. Put things into perspective. Ask yourself: “What does being half an hour late in traffic have to do with my life purpose? How important is it in the larger scheme of things?” This will allow you to settle down.

By staying mindfully aware, we can say, “This response is getting the better of me—I’m going to let it go.”

(Julia) I was on my way to lunch with a very close friend and a cousin of hers who was an acquaintance of mine. Having just wrapped up a meeting that had left me feeling angry, I arrived to find my two lunch companions already there and greeted them enthusiastically.

When Heather, whom I had not seen in about 15 years, remarked that I looked the same as I had the last time she saw me, I launched into a description of an argument I had had with someone who had said I had a lot of gray hair.

A couple of minutes into my story, Jacquie put her hand on my arm and said, “Whoa, slow down, girl! Why are you so hyper?” With her touch and her remark, Jacquie made me mindfully aware of how some stored emotions were affecting my energy.

I thought I had been managing the anger, and yet my hyper energy was a clear indication that I was not. I acknowledged to my lunch partners the anger I had been feeling from my previous meeting and told them I was going to set it aside. I rolled my shoulders back, straightened my posture, took a deep breath, and, laughing, told them that my hairdresser called my gray hair “blonde highlights.” The conversation proceeded at a leisurely and relaxed pace.

By not being mindfully aware of the state of my energy, I had jeopardized a lunch that had been months in the planning. I was thankful that Jacquie had been there to remind me of what I knew to do and had forgotten to do.

So when you feel yourself getting emotionally hijacked, you can either change your thought about it, along with the resulting emotion, or you can just let the emotion go for the moment. With the latter approach, it is important to come back later and explore the emotion, the thoughts, and the underlying beliefs to help avoid getting hijacked the next time.

Being Aware of Blocks to Interpersonal Energy

The second part of staying mindfully aware is being attentive to what may be blocking the flow of energy in interactions with others. The objective here is to sense when someone has something going on that’s dampening the energy between you. That “something” could be what’s going on within you or the other person, or it could be something in your immediate environment.

Even, or may be especially, when you are in a dialogue with somebody— whether with a spouse, child, business colleague, or client—the first step is still to stay aware of yourself. If you are trying to be empathetic, trying to persuade, or trying to accomplish something in that dialogue, you need the energy to flow. That means you need to be aware of things that are going to block your interpersonal energy. The source of these blocks may be physical, like a cold or a headache. They may be mental or emotional, like a disturbing conversation you’ve just had with a spouse. Or they may be environmental, like excessive noise or heat.

Whatever the case, ask yourself how the potential block may affect your interaction with others. If it is affecting your health, your state of mind, or your state of physical well-being,

expend some extra effort to get yourself engaged to improve the energy flow, or work to mitigate the blocks.

(Bob) I am president of an association in Toronto and was chairing our winter meeting in the midst of a terrible headache. I had to continually catch my mind drifting off either to thoughts unrelated to the meeting or to the pain itself. I needed to give myself some relief and still keep the energy of the meeting going. At one point I said to a fellow board member, “OK, Clark, this is your area. For the next 10 minutes, the meeting’s yours.”

By delegating part of the meeting to him, I was able to take advantage of another member’s strengths and to inject new energy into the meeting. I was also able to conserve what was left of my energy in order to concentrate on the overall flow of the meeting. My Thoughtful I had reminded me that complaining about my headache would be “all about me” and would block my own and everyone else’s energy. Mindful awareness brought about a much better result.

There’s no denying that it requires work to adopt and follow the practices that we’re describing in this book. It would be easier for you to continue to do what you have always done. It would be easier for you, having tried something new and finding it a challenge, to flip back into the old behaviors.

Our experience has convinced us that if more of us practiced being mindfully aware of just our own feelings, it would make an enormous difference in the world. And looking one step beyond that, if more of us were able to function at the level of understanding the interplay between people, we would then have the tools to begin to truly expand the energy that flows between people.

Working with Blockages in Others

The third level of awareness is seeing another person’s energy being blocked and thus having an impact on the interchange between you and them.

When you become aware of a blockage in another, you have two choices:

- You can suspend the conversation and explore what’s going on in the other person and the impact it’s having on the dialogue.
- Or you can wind up the conversation and defer it to a later time.

At this point in our analysis, behavior, not cause, is the concern. You don't need to be a psychologist or a social worker to resolve the situation. The beauty of the Energy Exchange method is that it's both behavior-based and thought-based.

(Bob) Like many other couples, my wife and I can sense quickly when something's not quite right between us, and it's usually because each of us is in a different space or mood. I'm quiet and she's exuberant, or vice versa, or I'm feeling a little down and she's "over the moon," or vice versa. It's at those times that the energy does not flow smoothly between us and we each recognize it and work to adjust the energy flow, or move out of the situation.

It takes the Thoughtful I in both of our minds to make the required adjustments, to keep us from reacting automatically and contributing to a mound of sludge that could build up between us.

Many people think the key to such situations is to explore with the other person what is causing them to react in a dysfunctional manner. From the perspective of energy flow, however, the origins and content of the feelings don't matter to you. The goal for you and others is simply to stop any behavior blocking the flow of personal energy and the energy of the discussion.

It's important for you to understand the strength of the mind body connection and the ways in which the body does things we're not aware of. Our fight-or-flight responses are direct and physical, one of the automatic responses controlled by the amygdala in the brain.

Daniel Goleman, who pioneered the theory of emotional intelligence, writes that if we are more aware of our thoughts and their impact, we'll have more opportunity to control our responses. In other words, we take charge of our responses, and not the other way around.

In some situations, all you can do is focus on the behavior. Maybe what's inside blocking the person is something only a psychologist or psychiatrist can work with. However, knowing the source of the problem would be able to make the exchange all the better. If you care about the person and the relationship, it may be worth taking the time to reach a shared understanding of the source of the blockage.

You can help others be mindfully aware of themselves if there is trust and permission for you to do so. The prerequisite is the creation of a safe environment in which the individual can say things openly without fear of invalidation. The absence of fear enables the flow of creative energy.

The goal is to become mindfully aware of what may be operating within the person that's causing their energy to get blocked. Sometimes you can get to this point through dialogue. This kind of exchange can take place with a spouse, a child, a friend.

With the help of your Thoughtful I, you can learn to become more and more mindfully aware of what's happening inside and around you. As your awareness deepens, you can use it to improve your communications and your relationships.