

Summary:

What better way to help ease the onslaught of the daily barrage of stress than reading four textbooks at once, writing a couple ten to fifteen page papers, and publish a few online moodle posts and responses? I kid, of course, but this reading on mindfulness does come at the perfect time for those of us who feel like our brains might explode at any second. Again, I kid...

This article took me back, many years ago, when I was in the middle of a professional development “boot camp”, learning all about Dr. William Glasser’s “Choice Theory”. It was the single most influential period of learning about the profession of teaching for me, more so than my undergraduate work at Western Michigan, during my grad work at Oakland, and the eight years of teaching I’ve had up to this point. It was being led by the most interesting hipster I’ve ever met, Peter Driscoll, and we had just taken a break for coffee and refreshments. He passed to each of us a piece of dark Dove Chocolate, wrapped in foil, and told us not to eat it. He instructed us to unwrap it slowly, thinking about the process that had gone into creating the packaging. Think of the printing machine, and the ink they must have used. Think of the people working in the factory who made sure the foil was wrapped correctly, and counted each piece as they went into the bag. Before long, we had unwrapped them, and began to put them into our mouths, when he told us not to bite it as we might have otherwise. He told us to hold it on our tongue, letting it melt slowly. As we did this, he told us to picture the place where the chocolate had come from, the people who had picked the cocoa, the people who had planted and cultivated the plants. The seed that the plant had grown from. He made us think about every aspect of that piece of chocolate.

This was my first experience with mindfulness, although I didn’t know it at the time. We were allowed to slow down and enjoy the taste of a piece of chocolate that had traveled far around the globe, and had been influenced and guided by so many people along the way. In the Time Magazine article, the author relates a similar story, but instead of chocolate, she contemplates a raisin. A raisin that at one time had been a grape, attached to a vine. Mindfulness allows people the chance to slow down and be mindful of the things in the present, rather than being pulled in multiple directions at once, towards the anxiety about the future, towards the ghosts that haunt the past, and around the world through our digital devices.

Highlights:

- The ultimate goal is to simply give your attention fully to what you’re doing.
- One can work, parent, learn, exercise, eat, and spend mindfully.
- There is no indication that the forces splitting our attention are going to abate, they’re getting stronger.
- It’s rare if working people can let an hour go by without looking at a screen, whether is be a desktop, laptop, phone, tablet, smart watches, and even smart glasses that beam into our periphery updates and reminders.
- Powering down the internal urge to connect with the outside world is a struggle, although there’s no point in berating ourselves for mentally veering away from the task at hand.
- Rather, they say, our ability to recognize that our attention’s been diverted is what’s at the heart of being mindful.
- Think of your attention span as a muscle, it makes sense to exercise it, and like any muscle, it will strengthen with that exercise.

- Most leaders feel besieged by long work hours and near-constant connectivity. For these people, it seems like there's no time to zero in on what's important and plan ahead.
- Multitasking leads to lower overall productivity.
- More than half of Americans check work messages on weekends, and 4 in 10 do so on vacation as well.
- Attention-focusing techniques, including meditation, frees up mental space and helps to think big.
- Check out an app called Headspace - developed by a former Buddhist monk.
- Meditation and rigorous mindfulness can reduce cortisol levels, blood pressure, and possibly even gene expression in chronic patients.
- A study in 2004 showed that Buddhist monks who had logged more than 10,000 hours of meditation had more functional connectivity in their brains than novice meditators, and higher amounts of gamma waves, indicating higher levels of consciousness.
- People who meditate may have more capacity for working memory and less mind-wandering.
- The average American teen sends and receives more than 3,000 text messages a month.

Implications / Moving Forward

Knowing what we know about mindfulness, and the important part it could play in our lives, it's surprising to me that more of us don't make the effort to set aside time to meditate. I know the excuse, "there aren't enough hours in the day" is a bogus one, but it's really how I feel. I seem to use the same excuse when it comes to exercising, which I also know scientifically to be good for one's health... Being mindful seems like the biggest gift one can give to oneself, and yet we too seldom indulge. I think with kids, this kind of mental exercise seems important too. If you could light the little candle of mindfulness, it may set in motion a different way of life for each child. I liked the author's tips that he has taken moving forward... resist the urge to listen to music or check emails while commuting to work, and instead observing or counting fellow passengers. If at a meal, and a friend gets up to use the bathroom, rather than filling your time looking at facebook, observe the people around you, or enjoy your food slowly and mindfully, contemplating each bite for what it is. Wear a watch instead of looking at your phone, and in so doing, resist the urge to fall mentally into the digital void, where hours can be consumed in a matter of minutes. You're sure to soon find yourself noticing things you didn't before, or arriving to work more present than before. When the urge to mentally flit away from the present situation appears, see it for what it is: a potential distraction. Acknowledge it, and tell that urge that you have witnessed it, and will come back to it later. Don't stifle it or be angry with yourself, but be aware of where your mind goes.

TAKE THE CHALLENGE! PUT AWAY THE COMPUTER FOR FIVE MINUTES BEFORE RESPONDING TO MY POST... NOTICE WHERE YOUR MIND WANTS TO TAKE YOU, AND WHAT FEELINGS ARISE WITHIN YOU. FOCUS ON YOUR BREATHING, AND BE PRESENT IN YOUR BODY. GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO TAKE FIVE FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH :-)