

Living in the present

*Today is the greatest
Day I've ever known
Can't live for tomorrow,
Tomorrow's much too long...*

BILLY CORGAN: *Today*. Siamese Dream (Smashing Pumpkins), 1993

Positivity whether it blooms as joy, serenity or inspiration literally gives a new outlook on life. Imagine yourself as a flower in springtime, your petals drawn in tightly around your face. If you can see out at all, it is only a speck of light. You can not appreciate much of what goes on around you. Yet once you feel the warmth of the sun, things change. You begin to soften. Your petals loosen and begin to stretch outward, exposing your face and you see more and more. Your world quite literally expands. Possibilities unfold. Some flowers bloom just once. Others flowers, close up every evening and bloom again every time they see the sun. This happens in people too. Positivity is essential to the growth of all humans. We know this instinctively. We turn toward positivity, stretching our minds open to take in as much as we can. Positivity broadens our mind and expands our vision. The effect is temporary. Threatened with negativity, our minds constrict even further. As positivity and negativity flows through us, the scope of our awareness blooms and retracts accordingly.

Positivity opens your mind naturally, like a flower that opens with the sunlight. The beauty of this arrangement is that positivity and openness feed on each other, each triggering and reinforcing the other. This link means that another lever you can grasp to increase positivity is to be open. Be open and positivity will follow. By nature's design, positivity opens your mind. Nature has ensured that you will have at least a taste of mindful awareness in your life, a taste of the openness that sets you to grow and builds your resources. You get these moments automatically every time you experience heartfelt positivity. If you want to experience more of these moments you can increase your openness. Once you deliberately cultivate openness, positivity follows automatically.

So what is mindfulness? Mindfulness is a skill. It is a way to relate to ourselves and the world around us. With practice you learn to observe the contents of your mind calmly in a non-reactive way. You can take a step back from your thoughts to gain a wider perspective on your thinking. It is about being guided as opposed to controlled by planning. Becoming more mindful, then, entails attending to your own inner experience with full awareness and without judgment. Mentally, you take a step back

from the stream of your thoughts and sensations, to gain a wider perspective on your thinking. With practice, you learn to observe the contents of your mind, in a non-reactive way. You learn to accept a thought as just a thought. It is simply an occurrence in your mind that rises, takes shape and passes, much as a particular pattern among the clouds forms the sky, and then soon they disappear.

Mindfulness is about moments. These days most people feel they do not have enough time. This creates a lot of stress and unease. Multitasking often leads to reduced concentration and mistakes, which then take up more time. Some people become so dispirited by their “to do” list that they put things off, hoping it will be easier another day. Sometimes if left longer the list becomes longer. When time feel likes this, everything seems an effort. Yet there are people who do a lot but do not appear to be busy. They are carefree. How they do manage that?

The secret lies in how much we understand and value ourselves and time. This enables us to focus on what is important. As human beings we constantly experience change, from being a child, to a young person to an adult. Yet, I am the one who experiences the world and expresses myself through this ever-changing body, remain the same. The key is to be in the present and aware of myself as a spiritual being, temporarily inhabiting the body I use, observing and taking part in the great drama of life. I play my physical role with responsibility but I can also step back mentally from the role and observe myself.

The role then becomes more beautiful, more precise and more accurate because I can understand better how to play it objectively. I come into time, into the drama of life but I can also step back into another awareness, that of timelessness of eternity. This practice we experience and develop through silence and mediation. So how can you increase your energy?

If you use your time and energy in ways that are useful and benevolent, you will experience a lot of happiness and strength internally and in your relationships. We can waste so much time and energy thinking unhelpfully of the past or creating expectations of an ideal future. Yesterday is gone and it is what I do in the moment that will determine the future that I and others would like to see. So what I have to do is focus my attention on the present and the quality of my emotions, thoughts and actions now. With a better understanding of my self and time, I am able to tap into my inner power and the power and energy and use that in a worthwhile way to help bring positive changes into my own life.

The key belief however that keeps most of us stuck in our stress cycles of thought, emotion, action and outcome is the belief that generally runs the world today i.e. “It is not ME it is THEM! It is not me that makes me feel this way, it is them that makes me feel this way”. Actually, no it is not. It is not them, it is me! In other words it is not the event, the other person, the deadline, the environment, the state of world that ‘causes’ your stress, it is how you respond to them. Your response is entirely 100% your responsibility. That means the components of your response i.e. your thoughts, emotions, words and actions, are entirely 100% your creation.

Some people do not like this idea and say, “But it’s natural to get upset and angry, it’s natural to feel frightened and edgy, it is natural to feel sad and depressed”. Thereby either clinging on to their ‘stress’, or subconsciously attempting to avoid the work of changing what are probably habits of a lifetime. Others love this idea and embrace it’s insight as it means they can do something about their stress. It means they can liberate themselves from the suffering that all stress is. They see a new and deeper freedom up ahead.

The most common form of stress is when others or the world does not do what we want, or does what we do not want. The frustration and anger that we then create and feel in response can be traced back to a belief that we learn from parents and teachers, that the world should dance to our tune, or the belief that we can control what we cannot control i.e. other people and events. Most of us are ‘carriers’ of this belief, which has become like a permanent subconscious ‘infection’. It then shapes our perception of events and people as negative when they do not do what we want. That gives rise to negative thoughts. The simplest definition of stress for a human being is simply ‘negative thinking’. That then triggers the emotions that we feel, and the attitude and behaviour follows accordingly.

Before anything can change for the better, before we can begin our journey to liberation from stress/suffering we have to drop the belief it’s them not me, and realise the truth that it’s me not them... in absolutely every situation... without exception. Then comes the necessary work of changing the belief that you can control others and events which has to be replaced with the realisation of the truth that the one and only thing you can control in life is your self. Only then can you stop creating the frustration, which is anger, when others don’t do what you want. Only then will you be able to move out of a state of resistance into a mode of acceptance. That is the moment when you stop trying to control what you can never control anyway. A moment that could be called kind of enlightenment! You are then able to accept people in particular as you find them, and life in general as you find it. As many enlightened parents and managers will tell you that is when you have maximum influence (not control). What is one of life’s successes based upon? How well you learn to influence those around you. Try to control others and, in the long run, you lose your influence.

Feelings of stress, which are always emotions (that we feel) always have their roots in our beliefs. Some beliefs are obviously deeper and more powerful than others. For example if you believe the world is a dark and dangerous place (easy to assimilate if you read too many newspapers) you will perceive events and people as threatening so you will think negatively about events and therefore feel negative (fear and anger). If, on the other hand, you believe the world is an adventure playground you will perceive (interpret) all circumstances as an opportunity to play. Your thoughts and feelings will always be positive and uplifting not down heartening. If you believe the other person is stupid then you will likely create negative thoughts and feelings about them, which means around them ‘within’ your consciousness. You will then be the one who

feels continuously negative i.e. stressed in your relationship with that person. So if you want to free yourself from stress then free yourself from your stressful beliefs.

This of course is a little easier said than done because most of our beliefs are outside of our day-to-day and moment-to-moment awareness. We need to surface these beliefs into our conscious awareness so that we can see what exactly we need to change. Hence the practical benefit we can gain from some form of contemplation or meditation. During such quiet moments we lower the line between our conscious and subconscious slightly, and up pops the belief that we forgot we believed, and have never therefore challenged. And when we see what are obviously stress creating beliefs we can then change them.

This process is useful, and it does work, as many more people are beginning to use it to change their self-created 'stress experience'. But it is the long road home because there are so many beliefs within our learned and personal belief system.

Question: What current situation/relationship in your life today is triggering (not causing) your stress?

Reflection: Take a few moments and see if you can become aware of the beliefs you have created and are holding around the situation/person that are giving rise to your stress i.e. your negative thoughts and feelings.

Action: Action begins with changing your beliefs and perceptions about the situation/person. Write down the new stress free beliefs/perception. Then take a moment to visualise your new behaviour the next time you encounter that situation/person.

Practicing mindfulness is a positive intervention, according to scientists, associated with decrease in depression as well as positive effects on happiness, physiology and cognitive abilities.

Another positive intervention that allows you to live in the present is savouring. People have the capacities to attend, appreciate and enhance the positive experiences in their lives. Noticing and savouring life's small and big positive occurrences is a powerful tool for increasing your overall well-being. Do you quickly drink your coffee and eat your breakfast whilst checking your emails first thing in the morning? Or do you linger over coffee, enjoying the smell before your first sip, and then feeling the hot liquid warming you from within? Immersing yourself with this latter experience with all your senses is known as savouring.

You can find them in your daily lives or intentionally focus on specific activities. Try these techniques that promote savouring:

- Sharing with others – You can seek out others to share the experience and tell others how much you value the moment. It's the best way to savour pleasure!



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life flows better with greater positivity

- Memory-building – Take mental photographs of the event and reminisce about it later.
- Self-congratulation – Tell yourself how impressed others are and remember how long you've waited for this to happen.
- Sharpening perceptions – Focus on certain elements of an immediate experience and block out others.
- Absorption – Let yourself get totally immersed and try not to think, just sense.

Savouring is not the same as mindfulness for it does not imply openness to all inner and outer stimuli. The focus of savouring is all about generating positive affect. So have a go, whether it be mindfulness or savouring, it only takes a moment!

The living moment is everything.

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