

THE BIG IDEAS

False Limits

Let's not be deterred.

"How do I do it?"

vs. "Can I do it?"

Outcome vs. Process

Where's your focus?

Mindful of Depression

Notice the variability!

Work vs. Play

Makes a huge difference.

Being More Mindful

It's time.



Mindfulness

25th Anniversary Edition

BY ELLEN J. LANGER · DA CAPO © 2014 · 246 PAGES

"One day, at a nursing home in Connecticut, elderly residents were each given a choice of houseplants to care for and were asked to make a number of small decisions about their daily routines. A year and a half later, not only were these people more cheerful, active, and alert than a similar group in the same institution who were not given these choices and responsibilities, but many more of them were still alive. In fact, less than half as many of the decision-making, plant-minding residents had died as had those in the other group. This experiment, with its startling results, began over ten years of research into the powerful effects of what my colleagues and I came to call *mindfulness*, and of its counterpart, the equally powerful but destructive state of *mindlessness*.

Unlike the exotic 'altered states of consciousness' that we read so much about, mindfulness and mindlessness are so common that few of us appreciate their importance or make use of their power to change our lives. This book is about the psychological and physical costs we pay because of pervasive mindlessness and, more important, about the benefits of greater control, richer options, and transcended limits that mindfulness can make possible."

~ Ellen Langer from *Mindfulness*

[Ellen Langer](#) is one of the world's leading research scientists, the first tenured female professor in Harvard's Psychology Department, and creator of what she calls the psychology of possibility—challenging the limits of what we perceive to be impossible.

In short, she's awesome and her research is truly fascinating.

This is the second of three Notes we have on her work. Check out the Notes on [Counterclockwise](#) and [Mindful Learning](#) for more goodness.

This book was published over 25 years ago in 1989—before the concept of "mindfulness" went mainstream. (Get a copy [here](#).) Ellen focuses on a Western orientation to mindfulness rather than the popular Eastern. As she says, "*Meditation is a tool to achieve post-meditative mindfulness. Regardless of how we get there, either through meditation or more directly by paying attention to novelty and questioning assumptions, to be mindful is to be in the present, noticing all the wonders that we didn't realize were right in front of us.*"

I'm excited to share a few of my favorite Big Ideas so let's jump straight in!

DON'T BE DETERRED BY FALSE LIMITS

"When we think of resources being limited, we often think of our own abilities. Here, too, our notion of limits may inhibit us. We may push ourselves to what we believe are our limits, in swimming, public speaking, or mathematics. However, whether they are true limits is not determinable.

"Because rigidly following set rules and being mindful are, by definition, incompatible, this book will not offer prescriptions."

~ Ellen Langer

"Mindlessness is pervasive. In fact I believe virtually all of our problems-personal, interpersonal, professional, and societal-either directly or indirectly stem from mindlessness."

~ Ellen Langer

It may be in our best interest to proceed as though these and other abilities might be improved upon, so that at least we will not be deterred by false limits. It was once assumed that humans could not run the mile in fewer than five minutes. In 1922 it was said to be 'humanly impossible' to run the mile in less than four minutes. In 1952 that limit was broken by Roger Bannister. Each time a record is broken, the supposed limit is extended. Yet the notion of limits persists."

Limits.

We want to be mindful of how quickly and easily we set false limits for ourselves. This is the essence of Ellen's "Psychology of Possibility."

Here's another brilliant blurb capturing the point:

"Research like these vision studies highlights the dangers of setting limits for ourselves. For instance, I've asked my students: What is the greatest distance it is humanly possible to run in one spurt? Because they know the marathon is twenty-six miles, they use that number to start and then guess that we probably haven't reached the limit, so they answer around thirty-two miles. The Tarahumara, of Copper Canyon in Mexico, can run up to two hundred miles. If we are mindful, we don't assume limits from past experience have to determine present experience."

Running two hundred miles in one spurt. Running a mile in less than four minutes when doctors tell you it's physically impossible. Running 250 (!) marathons in one year.

rubs eyes

These are all difficult but not impossible.

Much like the story [Joe De Sena](#) shares in his great book *Spartan Up* (see Notes) of the guy (Göran Kropp) who rides his bike from Sweden to the Himalayas, summits Everest without a guide or extra oxygen, then rides his bike back to Sweden.

Crazy difficult but not impossible.

Back to you.

What limits do you set for yourself?

Now a good time to stretch those a bit? :)

Here's one way to help with that:

"HOW DO I DO IT?" VS. "CAN I DO IT?"

"In contrast, a process orientation . . . asks 'How do I do it?' instead of 'Can I do it?' and this directs attention toward defining the steps that are necessary on the way. This orientation can be characterized in terms of the guiding principle that *there are no failures, only ineffective solutions.*"

Two Big Ideas I want to dive into here.

First, notice the difference between these two questions:

"How do I do it?"

vs.

"Can I do it?"

One is focused on the process, the other on the outcome. Which do you think is more mindful/more helpful? :)

Let's try it right now. Think about a challenge in your life.

Got it?

"Our life is what our thoughts make it."

~ Marcus Aurelius

Ask yourself, "Can I do it?!"

Note your thought process.

Now ask yourself, "**How** do I do it?"

Note your thought process.

Which is more empowering? (Huge difference, eh?!)

Second, when we mindfully embrace the process orientation, we remember this guiding principle: *"there are no failures, only ineffective solutions."*

That's the essence of a Big Idea from the Note I created yesterday on [Tal Ben-Shahar's *Choose the Life You Want*](#) (interestingly, Tal and Ellen were both professors at Harvard). Here's what Tal has to say on the subject: *"When we hear about extremely successful people, we mostly hear about their great accomplishments—not about the many mistakes they made and the failures they experienced along the way. In fact, most successful people throughout history are also those who have had the most failures. That is no coincidence. People who achieve great feats, no matter what field, understand that failure is not a stumbling block but a stepping-stone on the road to success. There is no success without risk and failure. We often fail to see this truth because the outcome is more visible than the process—we see the final success and not the many failures that led to it."*

When I acknowledge that fulfilling my potential must involve some failure, I no longer run away from risks and challenges. The choice is a simple one: Learn to fail, or fail to learn."

How's your mindset?

Can you see that there are no failures, just ineffective solutions?

Here's to approaching our challenges with a process-orientation and seeing results as simply data that guides us on our quest!

And, here's another Big Idea to help us mindfully embrace that! :)

EVERY OUTCOME IS PRECEDED BY A PROCESS

"A true process orientation also means being aware that every outcome is preceded by a process. Graduate students forget this all the time. They begin their dissertations with inordinate anxiety because they have seen other people's completed and polished work and mistakenly compare it to their own first tentative steps. With their noses deep in file cards and half-baked hypotheses, they look in awe at Dr. So-and-so's published book as if it had been born without effort or false starts, directly from brain to printed page. By investigating how someone got somewhere, we are more likely to see the achievement as hard-won and our own chances as more plausible."

Genius.

Want to stress yourself out?

Here's a simple recipe: Negatively compare yourself to someone you admire by focusing on where they're at today while imagining they got there effortlessly then conclude that something must be wrong with you because you're feeling a bit incompetent and nowhere near their level.

Hah!

Welcome to the limited, outcome-focused, fixed mindset.

To relieve that stress, focus on the PROCESS that everyone goes through to attain mastery. Focus on getting a little better each step of the way rather than trying to prove you've got it from Day 1.

"When the will to act is thwarted, it atrophies into a wish to be taken care of."

~ Ellen Langer

That's the growth mindset. That's where the magic is.

As [Carol Dweck](#) tells us in her classic book [Mindset](#) (see Notes): "People with the growth mindset know that it takes time for potential to flower."

Here's to celebrating the time and effort involved in cultivating the flowering of our potential!

MINDFUL OF DEPRESSION

"A mindful approach to our health is particularly effective for 'chronic' conditions. For example, consider depression. When people are depressed they tend to believe they are depressed all the time. Mindful attention to variability shows this is not the case, which itself is reassuring. By noticing specific moments or situations in which we feel worse or better, we can make changes in our lives. If every time I speak on the telephone to Bob I feel worthless, for example, the solution may be obvious."

This is a big one.

A key part of Langer's work on mindfulness is bringing attention to variability.

We're *mindful* when we see the variability in our lives. We're *mindless* when we don't.

With depression, we often mindlessly think we're *always* depressed. But that's never the case. There are times when we feel pretty good and times when we feel much worse. We want to notice this variability. By bringing mindfulness to our experience of depression, we can do more of the things that are associated with feeling good and less of the things that tend to go with feeling bad.

The Dalai Lama captures this wisdom nicely: "*One begins identifying those factors which lead to happiness and those factors which lead to suffering. Having done this, one then sets about gradually eliminating those factors which lead to suffering and cultivating those which lead to happiness. That is the way.*"

Not complicated. And, whether we're depressed or not, the same rules apply to our lives.

There are times when we're more on than others. By bringing mindfulness to days when we're ON FIRE, we can replicate those behaviors to make that a more consistent experience. And, of course, by being mindful of moments and days when we're just not quite on, we can bring mindfulness to those experiences and thereby reduce the blips.

Put that together, have fun doing it day in and day out for decades and who knows what you're capable of?

Hint: It's indeterminable. But a LOT of fun to explore, eh?

Here's to optimizing and actualizing! :)

WORK VS. PLAY

"Trying to remain mindful in all that we do may seem exhausting. In many talks I've given over the years, people shudder when I say we should be mindful virtually all the time. They think it's hard work. I believe that being mindful is not hard, but rather it may seem hard because of the anxious self-evaluation we add. 'What if I can't figure it out?' Anxiety causes stress, and stress is exhausting. Mindfulness is not. Being mindful allows us to be joyfully engaged in what we are doing. Time races by, and we feel fully alive. It can be physically strenuous, but also great fun. We did a study in which we had two groups of people do the same task: rate cartoons. One group was introduced to the task as work and another as play. The first group found that their minds wandered, and they clearly were not having fun. The group who approached the very same task as if it were a game enjoyed the entire experience."

"The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play."

~ Arnold Toynbee

Hah! We'll start with the end.

Same task. Two scenarios. One group is told they are doing "work" and the other is told they will be engaged in "play." And... The play group has a heck of a lot more fun.

Two things:

1. That's nuts.
2. How do you approach what you do on a day-to-day basis?

Way before scientists were studying this stuff, Walter Russell had this to say: *"There should be no distasteful tasks in one's life. If you just hate to do a thing, that hatred for it develops body-destructive toxins, and you become fatigued very soon. You must love anything you must do. Do it not only cheerfully, but also lovingly and the very best way you know how. That love of the work which you must do anyhow will vitalize your body and keep you from fatigue."*

He also tells us: *"A menial task which must be mine, that shall I glorify and make an art of it."*

Imagine THAT approach next time you're doing the mundane.

That's Mindfulness 101.

So is this gem from [Thomas Sterner](#) in [The Practicing Mind](#) (see Notes): *"Try this the next time you are faced with doing something you define as not enjoyable or as work. It doesn't matter if it is mowing the lawn or cleaning up the dinner dishes. If the activity takes a long time, tell yourself you are going to just work on staying present and process-oriented for the first half hour. After that you can hate it as much as usual, but in that first half hour you are absolutely not going to think of anything but what you are doing. You are not going to go into the past and think of all the judgments you have made that define this activity as work. You are not going to go into the future anticipating when it will be completed, allowing you to go participate in an activity that you have defined as "not work." You are just going to do whatever it is you are doing right now for half an hour. Don't try to enjoy it, either, because in that effort you are bringing emotions and struggle into your effort. If you are going to mow the lawn, then accept that all you need to do is cut the grass. You are going to notice the feel of the mower as you push it, how it changes resistance with the undulations of your front yard. You will pay attention to cut as wide a path as possible, not sloppily overlap the last pass you made as you gawk at the neighbor across the street washing their car. You will smell the cut grass and notice how the grass glows with green in the sunlight. Just do this for one-half hour of the activity. You will be amazed. Once you experience how the activity as mundane as mowing the grass is transformed, you will have the motivation to press on, because the potential effect this could have on your life and how you perceive it will become apparent to you."*

Here's one more thought from [Dr. Stuart Brown](#)—one of the world's leading thinkers on the science of play (see Notes on [Play](#)). He tells us: *"Finally, and perhaps most important, work that is devoid of play is either boring or a grind. We can get pretty far through sheer willpower, and some people have prodigious powers of perfectionism, self-denial, and suffering. Ultimately, though, people cannot succeed in rising to the highest levels of their field if they don't enjoy what they are doing, if they don't make time for play. Having a fierce dedication to grinding out the work is often not enough. Without some sense of fun or play, people usually can't make themselves stick to any discipline long enough to master it."*

People always say that you can reach the top by 'keeping your nose to the grindstone,' but as sports performance specialist Chuck Hogan observes, this is not true. People reach the highest levels of a discipline because they are driven by love, by fun, by play. 'The great performers perform as they do, and do so with such grace, because they love what they are doing,' Hogan observes. 'It's not work. It's play.'"

"Mindfulness lets us see things in a new light and believe in the possibility of change."

~ Ellen Langer

Back to you.

What can you do to reframe your work as play a little more today?

TIME TO BE MORE MINDFUL

"The more we realize that most of our views of ourselves, of others, and of presumed limits regarding our talents, our health, and our happiness were mindlessly accepted by us at an earlier time in our lives, the more we open up to the realization that these too can change. And all we need do to begin the process is to be mindful."

Mindlessness vs. mindfulness.

The choice of how we navigate our lives is up to us.

Let's be mindful of that and choose wisely as we playfully embrace the process of pushing the limits of what's possible!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "Mindfulness"

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Ellen J. Langer is the author of eleven books, including the international bestseller *Mindfulness*, which has been translated into fifteen languages, and more than two hundred research articles. Langer's trailblazing experiments in social psychology have earned her inclusion in *The New York Times Magazine's* "Year in Ideas" issue and will soon be the subject of a major motion picture. A member of the psychology department at Harvard University and a painter, she lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.