

THE BIG IDEAS



What Is Mindfulness

Good place to start.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Are huge.

“Doing” vs. “Being” Mode

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Doing vs. Being modes.

Raisin Mind

Is where it's at.

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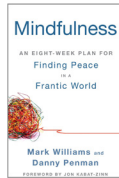
Count your gratitude!

Beginning Again

Is the heart of meditation.

Horticultural Time

vs. Clock time.



Mindfulness

An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World

BY MARK WILLIAMS AND DANNY PENMAN · RODALE © 2011 · 276 PAGES

“This is a book about how you can find peace and contentment in such troubled and frantic times as these. Or rather, this is a book about how you can *rediscover* them; for there are deep wellsprings of peace and contentment living inside us all, no matter how trapped and distraught we might feel. They're just waiting to be liberated from the cage that our frantic and relentless way of life has crafted for them. . . .

We wrote this book to help you understand where true happiness, peace and contentment can be found and how you can rediscover them for yourself. It will teach you how to free yourself progressively from anxiety, stress, unhappiness and exhaustion. We're not promising eternal bliss; everyone experiences periods of pain and suffering, and it's naive and dangerous to pretend otherwise. And yet, *it is possible to taste an alternative to the relentless struggle that pervades much of our daily lives.*”

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman from *Mindfulness*

Mindfulness.

I'm currently having fun diving into neuroscience + mindfulness + other such goodness. I actually purchased three books with the title “Mindfulness” on the same day. This was the first I read. Really good.

[Mark Williams](#) is a professor of clinical psychology at Oxford and a leader in the field of applying mindfulness to cognitive therapy. (<— very cool!) He and [Danny Penman](#) teamed up to create this “*eight-week plan for finding peace in a frantic world.*”

The book is packed with both high level insights into the nuts and bolts of the why's and how's of mindfulness + meditation, plus a series of mindfulness meditation practices we can engage in over the prescribed eight week period of time to transform our lives.

I'm excited to share a handful of my favorite Big Ideas. Let's jump straight in!

We'll start with a basic, essential question:

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

“Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness or stress hovers overhead, rather than taking it all personally, you learn to treat them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly curiosity as they drift past. In essence, mindfulness allows you to catch negative thought patterns before they tip you into a downward spiral. It begins the process of putting you back in control of your life.”

Mindfulness. It's about the ability to *observe* our thoughts and feelings *without* being swept away by them.

“You come to the profound understanding that thoughts and feelings (including negative ones) are transient. They come and they go, and ultimately, you have a choice about whether to act on them or not.”

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

"Meditation is not about accepting the unacceptable. It is about seeing the world with greater clarity so that you can take wiser and more considered action to change those things that need to be changed."

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

Like clouds passing in the sky, we can see that our thoughts and feelings are transient. They come. They go. The problem arises when we get stuck in and carried away by them.

A metaphor we come back to often (and that we'll explore again in this Note) is that of a waterfall. We can sit directly under the waterfall and get pummeled on the head by its falling water. Or, we can swim on over to the bank of the lagoon and *observe* the water (aka thoughts/feelings/etc.) cascading down.

Cultivating the ability to swim over to the bank and compassionately observe all this activity is what mindfulness is all about.

OK. That makes sense. (Yah?) Now, what are the benefits of mindfulness? Glad you asked...

THE BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

"Numerous psychological studies have shown that regular meditators are happier and more contented than average. These are not just important results in themselves but have huge medical significance, as such positive outcomes are linked to a longer and healthier life.

- Anxiety, depression and irritability all decrease with regular sessions of meditation. Memory also improves, reaction times become faster and physical stamina increase.
- Regular meditators enjoy better and more fulfilling relationships.
- Studies worldwide have found that meditation reduces the key indicators of chronic stress, including hypertension.
- Meditation has also been found to be effective in reducing the impact of serious conditions, such as chronic pain and cancer, and can even help to relieve drug and alcohol dependence.
- Studies have now shown that meditation bolsters the immune system and this helps fight off colds, flu and other diseases."

Meditation.

The benefits are unequivocal.

Another leading scientist, [Jonathan Haidt](#), tells us meditation is pretty darn close to a magic pill. He puts it this way in [The Happiness Hypothesis](#) (see Notes): "Suppose you read about a pill that you could take once a day to reduce anxiety and increase your contentment. Would you take it? Suppose further that the pill has a great variety of side effects, all of them good: increased self-esteem, empathy, and trust; it even improves memory. Suppose, finally, that the pill is all natural and costs nothing. Now would you take it? The pill exists. It's called meditation."

You sold yet? The benefits are HUGE!!!

(Let's do this! :)

"DOING" VS. "BEING"

"It's all too easy to become locked into a cycle of suffering and distress when you try to eliminate your feelings or become enmeshed in overthinking. Negative feelings persist when the mind's problem-solving *Doing* mode volunteers to help, but instead ends up compounding the very difficulties you were seeking to overcome.

But there is an alternative. Our minds also have a different way of relating to the world—it's called *Being* mode. It's akin to—but far more than—a shift in perspective. It's a different way of knowing that allows you to see how your mind tends to distort "reality." It helps you to step outside of your mind's natural tendency to overthink, overanalyze and overjudge. You begin to

"You may be astonished by how much more happiness and joy are attainable with even tiny changes to the way you live your life."

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

"Mindfulness teaches us that thoughts are just thoughts; they are events in the mind."

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

experience the world directly, so you can see any distress you're feeling from a totally new angle and handle life's difficulties very differently. And you find that you can change your *internal landscape* (the *mindscape*, if you will), irrespective of what's happening around you. You are no longer dependent on external circumstances for your happiness, contentment and poise. You are in control of your life."

Doing vs. Being modes.

You ever overthink, overanalyze or overjudge?

Uhhhhhh....

Me, too. Just once or twice, though. Hah.

That overthinking habit is what Williams and Penman call your "Doing" mode. We try to solve or eliminate troubling emotions that would be much more skillfully handled through simple observation.

That observation, of course, is the heart of mindfulness. And the mode we're in as we practice this is our "Being" mode. The book is essentially all about helping us live from that place more consciously and consistently.

Importantly, Williams and Penman point out that "Doing mode is not an enemy to be defeated, but is often an ally. Doing mode only becomes a "problem" when it volunteers for a task that it cannot do, such as "solving" a troubling emotion. When this happens, it pays to "shift gear" into "Being" mode. This is what mindfulness gives us: the ability to shift gears as we need to, rather than being permanently stuck in the same one."

That's a big distinction.

We're not trying to defeat or eliminate "Doing" mode. Doing mode is great for many things! What we *do* want to master, however, is the ability to SHIFT from one way of being to another.

As we've discussed, the Buddhist word for suffering is *dukkha*. The word literally means a wheel whose hub doesn't move. To be stuck.

Imagine if a wheel on your car got stuck. You couldn't drive. Well, sometimes our minds (you may have noticed!) get a little stuck—overthinking and ruminating and unable to let a thought go. When that happens, guess what? We can't drive. We suffer.

The key is to "unstick" our minds. To enter the free-flowing state known as *sukha*. To do that consistently, we need to be able to shift gears from Doing to Being.

That requires mindfulness.

7 CHARACTERISTICS OF "DOING" VS. "BEING" MODES OF MINDS

Williams and Penman walk us through (in detail) the seven characteristics of "Doing" and "Being" modes of minds. Here they are quick-like:

1. Automatic pilot versus conscious choice

Automatic pilot is good for habitual things like brushing our teeth and tying our shoes. It becomes a problem when we engage in behaviors that don't serve us. Then we want to shift to conscious choice.

2. Analyzing versus sensing

Thinking thinking thinking thinking thinking and thinking. That's what we tend to do. Live in our heads. Mindfulness brings back to our senses so we can more consistently directly experience the world.

"Mindfulness brings you back, again and again, to full conscious awareness: a place of choice and intention."

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

"In these times of maximum stress and confusion, we learn the most, for it is when we see the most compelling thoughts as mental events—rather than truly reflecting reality—that we glimpse the possibility of freedom most of all."

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

3. Striving versus accepting

Our Doing mode constantly analyzes where we are relative to where we'd like to be. Do this obsessively and there's a tendency to perfectionism and a failure to appreciate the awesomeness of our current reality. Being mode is all about accepting and treasuring life "just as it is"!

4. Seeing thoughts as solid and real versus treating them as mental events

It's easy to think that thoughts are *real.* They are not. They are just thoughts. Mental events flitting through our minds. Just seeing this fact gives us the freedom to step outside of that waterfall and observe with a deeper level of freedom and equanimity and choice.

5. Avoidance versus approaching

Doing mode wants to create a perfect little bubble of awesomeness and avoid anything that doesn't fit its version of perfection. Being mode invites us to approach the very things we'd rather avoid. To "turn toward" these thoughts and feelings. Surprisingly, "this compassionate approach gradually dissipates the power of the negative feelings." This ability to "approach" that which we tend to want to avoid is a hallmark of well-being. Again, mindfulness helps us cultivate the skill.

6. Mental time travel versus remaining in the present moment

Thinking about the past and planning for the future are, of course, essential to living. But they are strongly biased by whatever mood we're in and it's easy to get carried away by "mental time travel." Mindfulness/being mode allows us to see that we are thinking about the past or planning for the future. This awareness diffuses the regret or anxiety unconscious time travel may create.

7. Depleting versus nourishing activities

We all do some things that deplete us and other things that nourish us. The question is: are we aware of them and consciously choosing what to do when? Doing mode just goes goes goes—often depleting us and rarely pausing to ensure we're taking care of ourselves as well. Being mode allows us to identify the activities that nourish us and take time for their goodness.

RAISIN MIND

"The Raisin meditation is the first sample of the central tenet of the mindfulness program: that is, relearning how to bring awareness to everyday activities so that you can see life as it is, unfolding moment by moment. This sounds simple, but it takes a great deal of practice. After the raisin exercise, participants in our mindfulness classes are asked to choose one activity that they normally do each day without thinking, and to see if they can bring "raisin mind" to it for the next few days. Perhaps you'd like to choose one such activity and join them in this simple but profound journey of awakening to the ordinary moments of living."

Raisin mind.

That's where it's at! :)

Williams and Penman kick off the first week by helping us "wake up from Autopilot"—taking the first step in shifting from living *mindlessly* to living *mindfully*.

How? By having us eat a raisin! :)

Check out the book for the full details but the basic idea is to recognize the fact that we tend to be on autopilot—rushing (mindlessly) through our lives... with pretty much everything we do.

The challenge? Take something you typically do on autopilot and SLOW down, bringing your *full* awareness to this mundane, everyday activity.

Although the exercise called for a raisin, Alexandra happened to have just made some dried bananas in our dehydrator. So, that was the focus of my experiment.

*"We don't see the world as it is but as *we* are."*

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

Slowing down to really SEE the shape and size and texture of the little piece of banana. To feel its weight in my hand. To smell it. To place the single piece on my tongue. To taste it and feel it as it changed texture and shape before chewing. Then to chew slowly and feel the taste and texture change.

IT WAS AWESOME. (Seriously. It was incredible.)

Typically we throw a handful of raisins (or whatever) into our mouths, mechanically chew + swallow (then throw another handful in) while our minds are somewhere else. Bam. Done.

What a huge (!) difference to actually slow down and experience all the amazingness that was **always** there.

Raisin mind = choosing to slow down more often. To switch off autopilot and relax into a mindful, present approach.

Whether it's with a raisin or with another activity you do everyday (like showering or brushing your teeth or doing the dishes or...), try it! I think you'll dig it. :)

THE TEN-FINGER GRATITUDE EXERCISE

"To come to a positive appreciation for the small things in your life, you can try the gratitude exercise. It simply means that once a day you bring to mind ten things that you are grateful for, counting them on your fingers. It is important to get to ten things, even when it becomes increasingly harder after three or four! This is exactly what the exercise is for—intentionally bringing into awareness the tiny, previously unnoticed elements of the day."

Gratitude.

It's one of the quickest, most powerful and reliable ways to boost our happiness.

We know it's huge and talk about it a lot through these Notes. (Check out the Note on [Thanks!](#) by [Robert Emmons](#)—the leading researcher on gratitude—for more on its power.)

We've explored gratitude journaling and "grateful flow" (check out the Note on [The Tools](#) for more on that great practice). And I just **love** this handy-dandy little ten-finger gratitude exercise.

Ten fingers. Get to work. What are you grateful for? Do that once a day and train your mind to see all that is wonderful!!

high ten

BEGINNING AGAIN

"The thought stream is so powerful that it can pick us up and whisk us away before we're even aware of it. You can imagine yourself sitting at the edge of a stream or small river, watching your thoughts as if they were leaves on the stream floating by. The next moment, you find that you've left your seat and sleepwalked into the middle of the stream. It's only a little later that you wake up and see that, *yet again*, you've become immersed in your thought stream. When this happens—as it surely will—you might congratulate yourself for having woken up, then compassionately acknowledge that your mind is wandering, gently haul yourself back on to the bank of the stream and start over again. The experienced meditator is not someone whose mind does not wander, but one who gets very used to beginning again."

That is such a brilliant look at the essence of meditation.

We'd like to position ourselves at the edge of the stream and watch our thoughts flow by like leaves in the water.

"Tiny actions can fundamentally alter your relationship to the world for the better."

~ Mark Williams and Danny Penman

And... We fall into the stream and get a little carried away. (Laughing.)

Then what? Then we hop back onto the edge, give ourselves a little high five for noticing we slipped, and START AGAIN.

One of the most common pitfalls is to think we're going to somehow turn off our thoughts. Not going to happen. As we learn: "The experienced meditator is not someone whose mind does not wander, but one who gets very used to beginning again."

HORTICULTURAL TIME VS. CLOCK TIME

"If some of these practices seem a little repetitive, it's because they are. Meditation is a simple practice that gains its power from repetition. It's only through this that we can become aware of the repeating patterns in our own minds. Ironically, meditative repetition frees us from endlessly repeating our past mistakes and the automatic pilot that drives self-defeating and self-attacking thoughts and actions. Through repetition, we gradually tune into the subtle differences that each moment brings.

Think of meditation as planting seeds. You give young seeds the right conditions, but you don't try to dig them up each day to see if they've grown roots. Meditation is like cultivating a garden: your experience deepens and changes, but this takes place in horticultural time, not clock time."

I just love that image.

We're planting seeds and cultivating a beautiful garden. It's best not to dig them up and check out how they're doing every morning. The results (alho surprisingly quick and unquestionably powerful), are measured best on horticultural time, not clock time.

Here's to tending our gardens and optimizing our lives!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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[Mindsight](#)

[The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#)

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About the Author of "Mindfulness"

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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.