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SESSION 1

Attention and the Now

ATTENTION

Attention focuses our awareness on a specific experience (Western, 1999). This process can be compared to the operation of a flashlight. Attention is like the light from the flashlight that illuminates a specific area and it therefore makes that area “conscious” to the one who is holding the light.



When it comes to attention there are two different elements at work:

1. The one which demands attention and
2. The one which regulates attention

Ad 1. External stimuli (such as noise, a handsome passerby or an advertisement on TV) but also internal stimuli (such as feelings, emotions or thoughts) may require attention. For example, when we suddenly hear a loud bang, our attention goes directly and automatically to this sound. The same is true for internal stimuli. Thus, a worrisome thought can also draw our attention and distract us from what we are doing.

Ad 2. Everybody has the will or ability to focus and regulate attention. When our attention is drawn by a loud bang, we can decide to focus our attention on what we were doing before. This process is called attention regulation and is a specific form of self-control. According to some researchers, attention regulation is the most important form of self-control. This is because attention plays a central role in all other forms of self-regulation, such as the regulation of emotions, impulses and thoughts (see, for example Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994).

To what extent we are able to regulate our attention is strongly related to well-being. The extent to which we have control over, among other things, attention is a strong predictor of happiness, satisfaction in social relationships, being resistant to temptations and academic performance (Duckworth & Seligman 2005; Kelly & Conley 1987; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone 2004). The good news is that control of attention can be trained (Tang et al, 2007; Oaten and Cheng, 2006). This we will do during the course.

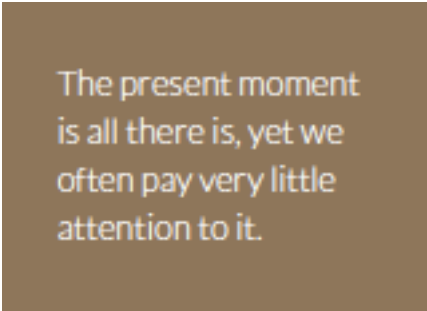
In mindfulness the training of attention is essential. Mindfulness teaches to focus the attention on what is happening in this moment, the now. Although this sounds easy, it seems that we often just do not live in the moment, but rather focus our attention on our thoughts or the content of our thoughts. When we look back at the previously discussed dichotomy of the elements at work here, one could say that thoughts belong to the first category; they require attention. Mindfulness appeals to the second category, the one that regulates attention. Applying mindfulness exercises is a form of training attention.

In line with the above, studies show that mindfulness training improves attention and self-control (Tang et al, 2007; Fetterman, Robinson, Ode and Gordon, 2010; Chambers, Yee Lo, & Allen, 2008; Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & Goolkasian, 2010).

THE PRESENT MOMENT

Of all the things we can draw our attention to, we pay relatively little attention to the now. Our attention goes rather to thoughts about the past or the future. As we are taking a shower in the morning, we rarely pay attention to showering itself and the sensations that it entails. Instead, we are focusing on the things that need to be done that day, or we think about things we did yesterday.

Mental “tools” like thinking and planning can be very useful. However, at the same time they can cause emotional imbalance. This is because we are often not able to stop thinking and planning when we no longer need to. They are powerful tools but often difficult to let go of. Consequently, we think more about life than we actually experience life.



The present moment
is all there is, yet we
often pay very little
attention to it.

Concerns about the future, regrets about the past, comparing oneself with others and constantly thinking about how things could be better are examples of typical thoughts. Constant thinking makes it impossible to fully enjoy a nice meal, a nice concert or falling rain. And this constant thinking not only distracts our thoughts and attention from the here and now but when thoughts are negative, they can also cause problems such as anxiety or stress.

Mindfulness can help us realize that thoughts are just thoughts; they are not reality. By focusing our attention on the present moment, we free ourselves from obsessive thinking and make contact with our direct experience, rather

than a mental story. Soon we realize that in this moment, right here and right now, there is rarely an actual problem.

Being able to make contact with the present moment has clear benefits. Research shows that people who are more mindful are in general happier (Drake, Duncan, Sutherland, Abernethy, & Henry, 2008), report less anxiety, depressive discomforts, anger and worries (Baer, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Greeson & Brantley, 2008; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). A higher degree of mindfulness is also associated with reduced stress, more gratitude, hope and vitality (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cardaciotto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra, & Farrow, 2008; Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmueller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006).

EXERCISE: THE BODY SCAN

The body scan, as the name suggests, entails bringing awareness to each part of the body, starting with the feet and moving up from there.

Tips for the body scan:

1. During meditation, you may get distracted, fall asleep, find your mind wandering, feel body sensations. Consider that it's part of and a challenge of the exercise. There is no right or wrong to meditation practice. The moment you realize that you are not present in the exercise you are in fact already present. Simply realizing that you are not present is a success and the non-presence makes success possible.
2. If your mind wanders a lot, consider these thoughts as passing events, nothing special). Then try to gently bring your attention back to the body scan in the present moment.
3. Try not to make ideas such as "success", "failure", "doing really well" or "trying to relax the body" the main focus. The body scan is not a competition; it is not a skill to be achieved. The only thing that is important and that really helps is practice.
4. Try to approach your experience with an accepting attitude, or in other words, to let it just happen: "that's just how it is right here, right now". If you try to avoid or suppress or expel unpleasant thoughts, feelings or physical sensations, chances are high that they will just return more often.

INFORMATION: THE BODY SCAN

- The body scan teaches us to recognize and experience physical sensations. Much of our attention focuses on our thoughts and on matters outside our body such as our job, social environment, etc. This creates the risk that one pays very little attention to physical signals. The recognition of physical signals such as tension or restlessness is important, especially for the prevention of stress and burn-out (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). The body scan is a method to get more in touch with body sensations and signals and to become familiar with them.



- The body scan is a method that allows us to experience how strongly we experience the noise of our thoughts throughout our bodies. The simple instruction binds attention to one part of the body at a time, this can be much more difficult than one might initially think.
- The body scan is a method to learn how to draw attention to a specific point. In the body scan, the point of attention is one part of the body. The effect of the training of attention in this way can also transfer to other areas, such as focusing (concentrating) the attention on a specific task, a conversation with someone, etc.
- The body scan is a method that helps to learn to detect when attention wanders. Being able to notice when attention wanders is a critical component of successful self-control. Within the self-control literature this function is indicated by the term “monitoring” (for more information see: Carver, 2004).
- The body scan can provide insight into the nature and pattern of thoughts in general. In this way you may notice recurring themes of thoughts and realize how some thoughts are played over and over again like an old record.

- The way in which attention is returned to the body, gently without judgment is an exercise in an important part of mindfulness: self-compassion.

AT HOME

- Try to do the body scan (short or long) at home. The more repetitions the greater the effect. The best would be to do the body scan daily. However, if this doesn't work out for you, try to practice as often as possible.

Advice

Choose a fixed time and place. It can help enormously to reserve a certain time of day on your calendar for the exercise.

- Tip: Choose one (or more) routine activities, such as brushing your teeth, cycling home, eating, doing the dishes, going to the supermarket, taking a walk, etc. and try to do it with full attention. In other words, try to focus on the act just as you try to keep your attention to a certain body part during the body scan.
- During the next week I choose the following routine activities where I consciously focus my attention on:

1

2

3

- During the next week, try to pay attention to how you make conversation. Try as fully as possible to focus on the conversation and the person/persons you are together with. The moment you notice that your thoughts are distracted, return your attention to the conversation. Try to be as present as possible.

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

TUESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

WEDNESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

THURSDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

FRIDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

SATURDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

SUNDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

NOTES
