

Want to Be Happier? Keep Your Focus

5 ways to increase your focus and stay in the moment.

By Deborah Kotz

Nearly half the time we're awake, our thoughts drift to topics unrelated to whatever we're doing. We think about the fight we had with our spouse when we're driving or replay events from a friend's wild party while brushing our teeth in the morning. We text incessantly while watching TV and phone mom during laundry-folding time. And all the while our minds are wandering—even when we're having pleasant daydreams—we're not very happy, according to a new study published today in the journal *Science*. "How often peoples' minds wander is definitely a big predictor of who's happy and who's not happy," says study author Matthew Killingsworth, a doctoral candidate in psychology at Harvard University, because the more often they take themselves out of the present moment, the less happy they are.

The study found that happiness falls when folks aren't focused on the task at hand, even an unenjoyable one, like doing errands. The researchers used a novel approach to get real-time snapshots of what the 2,250 study participants were thinking and how they felt throughout the day. They developed a free iPhone app that buzzed volunteers, whose average age was 34, several times a day asking them how they were feeling right before they were contacted, what they were doing and whether they were thinking about something other than what they were doing. Except during sex, participants recorded their minds wandering during every activity; most frequently, minds drifted off during personal grooming like taking a shower, shaving, and putting on makeup.

Most of the daydreams were about unpleasant or neutral topics, like mental to-do lists. But even pleasurable mental fantasies left participants no happier than when they were focused on whatever activity they were doing: weaving through traffic, tying their shoes, writing out a check. How the heck can this be? "When the mind wanders to a happy memory, it tends to eventually turn back to things that aren't quite as positive," says health psychologist Kelly McGonigal, who teaches a class on the science of willpower at Stanford University.

Reminiscing about, say, that romantic Paris honeymoon might land you thinking about the snotty bellhop at the overpriced hotel where you stayed. This is the brain returning to what brain researchers refer to as its "default mode," a state of contemplating the past to learn from it, the future to prepare for it, or things in the present to see what needs to be fixed, explains Killingsworth. This default mode probably gave us an evolutionary advantage by making us alert to dangers while we were hunting and gathering. "We maximized our survival chances even if we didn't maximize our happiness," says McGonigal. "Evolution doesn't give a damn about happiness."

But these days we don't worry about saber-toothed tigers, and we do give a damn about our happiness. So what can we do to get keep our thoughts from continuously fleeing the present moment? McGonigal says our mental focus, or mindfulness, can be built up, like a muscle, if we practice certain skills regularly. Try the following:

1. Start the day with a focused task.

And don't allow your mind to wander while you do it. Research suggests that those who practice a little mindfulness in the morning have a better ability to stay focused throughout the day. A good task to choose might be the shower, says McGonigal, where you're alone and

free of interruptions. Be fully present during your entire shower, and pay attention to sensory experience. "Feel the water, smell the shampoo, notice what your hands feel like when they soap your skin," she says. Take note of the glass fogging up and the sound of the water hitting the shower door or curtain.

2. Exercise with mindfulness.

Any sort of activity you do—walking, running, biking, swimming—can help increase mental focus by boosting blood flow in the brain, McGonigal says. But you can add mindfulness to your workouts by consciously shifting your attention to certain sensations while you exercise. Try this on your next walk or run: First feel your breath, she says, and let the sound of your inhales and exhales register. Then focus on your feet hitting the earth. What sensations do you feel in your legs? Next shift your attention to any sounds you hear, then what you see. After that, focus on yourself in contact with your environment, the sun on your skin, the rain on your forehead. Spend about a minute on each sensation before shifting your focus to a new one.

3. Immerse yourself in a good book or movie.

Reading a page-turner or watching a compelling movie or TV show can be a great way to practice mindfulness, McGonigal contends—provided that you don't allow yourself to be distracted by, say, a ringing phone or buzzing Blackberry.

4. Minimize multi-tasking.

"It's the enemy of mindfulness," says McGonigal. Stop the texting while having lunch with friends. Don't check your E-mail when you're helping the kids with homework (self please take note). And stop scanning the internet when you get a call from a client. If you still sense your mind wandering, force your attention back to the task at hand. Hear the voice you're listening to; read the words on the report in front of you; watch the car that's about to cut into your lane.

5. Practice five to 10 minutes of daily meditation.

Sure, most of us don't have a clue about meditating, but that's what the internet was invented for. McGonigal has a free audio meditation session you can listen to, and mindfulness expert Jon Kabat Zinn has posted a free video of a meditation class he gave to Google executives. The benefits? Those who practice regular meditation snap out of the brain's default wandering mode much faster than those who don't, according to a 2008 study from Emory University School of Medicine. They are also practicing a little defensive medicine. "If you meditate regularly," says McGonigal, "you'll prevent the cognitive decline in attention span that naturally occurs with aging."

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