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Awareness: Being Mindful

You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.

—Jon Kabat-Zinn

How much time should I give them to finish this reading? My room smells funky... teenage hormones probably. Should I cold-call on my students when they finish reading? No, a pair-share first. Am I doing too many pair-shares? Is that kid texting? No, just scratching his leg. I wonder if they have that taco bar in the cafeteria today. For real, what's that smell. Is it me? Did I put on deodorant? Some of them are finished reading. What was that mind-blowing question I was going to ask them... shoot. I had it a minute ago. I wonder if my son ate another rock at day care today. I hope not. How many small rocks can a small child eat safely? I need to buy some airfreshener for this room.

Welcome to the chaotic mind of an educator. Whether it's prepping our next words, pondering what happened during the last lesson, or anticipating our next meeting, we often live everywhere but in the present moment. And if we *are* focused on what we're doing, we're often tense, evaluating every decision and observation.

What if our habits of frantic thinking and circular fretting are wreaking havoc on our well-being? What if our greatest hurdle to our present happiness is that we aren't *aware* of what's happening in the present?

In this chapter we explore the two-headed beast of the unmanaged mind: rambling and ruminating. We'll not only understand how rambling and ruminating affect our well-being, but also learn how to tame the two heads of the beast.

Rambling

How often do human minds wander? Ten percent of the time? Thirty-three percent of the time? How often has your mind already wandered since starting this chapter?

Researchers have provided some good answers to this question, collecting a lot of data to better understand what we think about and how a wandering mind affects our well-being. Matt Killingsworth (2013) and a crew of researchers collected 650,000 real-time reports from 15,000 people of all ages around the world. Randomly, an alert would go off asking participants to respond to three questions:

1. How do you feel?
2. What are you doing?
3. Are you thinking about something other than what you're doing? (And if "yes," is it a pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant thought?)

So, how often *do* human minds wander? The answer: we spend 47 percent of our waking hours thinking of something other than what we're doing.

Mind-wandering can have benefits. Some aspects of mind-wandering help us come up with creative solutions or achieve aha moments. However, Killingsworth's data reveal that, more often than not, people are *less* happy when their minds are wandering. And the data show a causal effect. It isn't that we are unhappy and so we drift to pleasant dreams. Instead, mind-wandering tends to *precede* unhappiness (Killingsworth, 2013).

So, what's happening when we let our mind wander? And why is doing so reducing our sense of well-being? For those answers, we need to see what happens when the brain is in default mode.

No matter what time of day or type of thought, our brain is “in motion” as different parts are processing—an ecosystem never at rest. When we're actively focused on something (e.g., absorbed in an enjoyable, challenging hobby), a “task-positive” network of the brain is active (Hasenkamp, Wilson-Mendenhall, Duncan, & Barsalou, 2012). I refer to this as a Focused Attention Network (FAN). However, when we aren't focused on the external task at hand, our brain activates a network known as the Default Mode Network (DMN).

The Default Mode Network can challenge our well-being for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- When our thoughts are rambling, we aren't in a “flow state,” a deep and often satisfying engagement in a challenging and interesting task (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).
- When we focus on the past and the future, we aren't savoring the present moment and cultivating positive emotions.
- When we divide our attention, we make more mistakes and often take longer to complete important tasks (Medina, 2014).

But there's more. Not only does this mind-rambling Default Mode Network run opposite of savoring and flow; it also sets the stage for negative rumination. This is an important point: When our brain engages the Default Mode Network, it creates ideal conditions for the second head of the beast—rumination, which can be the true source of unhappiness.

Let's say your mind is like a classroom. Imagine you've provided students with an interesting, challenging learning task. They are engaged. They are present. They are in the zone. Although the occasional student might cause a distraction, he's easy to manage. Now imagine that you give students free time to do whatever they

want. They soon run amok. Distractions and misbehaviors pop up. This is the Default Mode Network at work. A mind without focused attention often finds mental mischief and leaves the gate open for the beast of rumination to devour our well-being. Rambling leads to ruminating.

Ruminating Our Own Ruin

It's the middle of the night and you *know* you need to sleep. Your brain starts rambling random thoughts, but soon you can't stop rehashing a scene or problem. Maybe you're thinking of perfect comebacks to that student's snarky question, or you have a school board presentation in a few days that you haven't started preparing for. Now you're stuck in a rumination loop.

In its most basic form, rumination is the experience of a repetitive thought. The word *ruminant* comes from the Latin *ruminare*, meaning "to chew over again." Just as ruminant animals rechew food to help digestion, rumination is theorized to have evolved in humans as a helpful mental process: pondering problems can help us generate solutions.

But, like many processes that serve a purpose in human evolution, rumination sometimes kicks in when it doesn't need to, like when a song plays in your mind over and over again. Much of our rumination, though, isn't about catchy pop songs. More often we ruminate about problems, real or imagined, from our past or from our simulated future.

You may be thinking, isn't focusing on a problem the *opposite* of mind wandering? If we were actually addressing the problem, then we would have focused attention. However, we typically *aren't* dealing with problems that are the subjects of our ruminations. We're postulating, then trying to get our minds off the stress, only to see it "wander" back into our thoughts. Rumination is the fly buzzing around a television screen. It flies away but circles back to smack itself against the screen around and disrupt our focus.

Although we may *think* this rumination is helping us solve problems by planning ahead, research finds that negative rumination makes us *worse* at problem solving (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Most of the time, we're simply spinning negative thoughts and emotions on a loop, rather than planning.

Our ramblings and ruminations are like an emotional acceleration system. Our rambling Default Mode Network opens up the throttle for worry and stress to go full blast. What we need, then, is a logical brake system. We need the ability to dampen our spiraling and cycling thoughts. That braking system is our Focused Attention Network. And, to give it a tune-up, we need to practice mindful awareness.

Mindfulness

What's the opposite of mind-wandering? Focused attention.

What's the opposite of obsessing about the past or the future? Being aware of the present.

What's the opposite of worry and evaluation? Detaching our judgment.

Introducing the counteraction to rambling and rumination, that thing you keep hearing and reading about: mindfulness.

Mindfulness is currently a hot topic of research. Although there's a lot about it that we don't know yet, what we do know offers much promise. For example, a meta-analysis of 39 research studies found moderate to strong effect sizes for mindfulness interventions on well-being. For the average person, mindfulness practices led to reduced anxiety (0.63 effect size) and increased positive mood (0.59). For those with high levels of anxiety, the effects were stronger (0.97 anxiety reduction; 0.95 positive mood increase (Davies, 2011).

Aside from decreasing anxiety and boosting our mood, benefits of mindfulness have included stronger interpersonal relationships (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007), better sleep (Carlson & Garland, 2005), better focus and attention (McGreevey, 2011), and increased body satisfaction (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2014), to name a few.

Most important for the classroom, there's growing evidence that mindfulness affects teacher stress management *and* the culture of the class (Roeser et al., 2013). One study randomly assigned 224 urban elementary teachers to either a mindfulness-based stress management program or a control group (Jennings et al., 2017). The teachers were then tracked and observed while teaching. Those who experienced mindfulness training improved their emotional regulation and reduced their psychological distress and urgency about time. Classroom observations showed that these teachers also had more positive interactions with students—taking more calming deep breaths, remaining curious instead of rushing to judgment and punishment when students misbehaved, and even smiling more.

I was slow to accept the value of mindfulness. In my studies, I had seen it come up often in religious and spiritual history. But as a pragmatic person, I didn't understand what mindfulness had to do with me. Although the psychological basis of mindfulness piqued my curiosity, it wasn't until I started practicing it—even for a few minutes a day—that I realized the pervasive benefits of having a more mindful awareness.

Before we get into the basics of mindfulness practice, let's see how your thoughts work. Here's the simple task:

1. Set a timer to go off in one or two minutes.
2. Once you start the timer, try to maintain your attention solely on your breathing.

3. Focus on each inhale, visualizing the air entering and filling your lungs. Then, focus on the exhale slowly leaving your nostrils.
4. Close your eyes and continue to focus on your breathing. Each time you catch your mind drifting to a thought *other* than your breathing, simply return your focus back to your inhales and exhales.

How'd it go? If you're like me, you probably felt wildly incompetent at this task, thoughts drifting repeatedly. This simple "pre-test" tells us how overpowering our Default Mode Network can be (and how weak our Focused Attention Network is).

If you struggled to maintain focus, you might think, "This isn't for me because I can't do it." Actually, the opposite is true. The harder it is to maintain focused attention, the more we may *need* to practice mindfulness. If you said, "I can't jog 20 yards without getting winded," it would be odd to then think, "I'm out of shape; cardio must not be for me." The worse shape we're in, the more important it is that we work out.

There are many ways to increase mindfulness, some of which I will outline later. Despite these variations, all of these practices hinge upon two basic concepts:

- Purposefully trying to maintain focus on experiences in the present moment (focusing on the present)
- Trying to refrain from evaluating or judging (accepting the experience)

Focusing on the Present

As educators, our world is plagued with events that divide our focus and shift thoughts from the present. Technology beeps and flashes, hitching us to hundreds of distractions in and beyond the classroom. Although we may have moments when we are present with our experience, typically our awareness shifts quickly.

We may see our rambling thoughts as a nuisance to our attempts to focus. However, if we reframe mind-wandering, we can leverage it to improve our Focused Attention Network.

View drifting thoughts as resistance training for focus. Each time your thoughts drift from the present, you have an opportunity to shift back and strengthen your focus. Just as resistance training changes muscular strength and efficiency, mindfulness practice changes the brain (Hölzel et al., 2011). Don't get frustrated, then, at the challenge of returning your focus. Welcome the opportunity for an attention-workout repetition.

In its most basic form, this is one of the main practices of mindfulness meditation. Although the *goal* is to maintain a focus on the present, the *practice* involves starting over whenever we notice that our minds have wandered. Some say that mindfulness meditation is the “art of beginning again.”

Once we shift our awareness to the present moment, we transition into shifting our emotional connection with the present, accepting and experiencing the moment as it is rather than ruminating about it. It's important to note that mindfulness is not just about paying more attention; it's about paying *different* attention. We move from our default *evaluating* mode to a more calming and grounding *experiencing* mode.

Accepting the Experience

We are a motivated species. (Even that student avoiding class work is motivated. Look at his level of dedication to repeatedly deconstructing and reconstructing his pen.) Our drive to “do” things makes it challenging to fully experience life as it is.

In their book *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, a group of mindfulness gurus, including Mark Williams of the Oxford Mindfulness Center and Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, discuss how mindfulness differs from our usual “do stuff” mode—and why it's critical for increasing our well-being (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007).

They divide awareness into two types: our *doing* mode and our *being* mode. Our doing mode is the type of thinking we use to analyze and solve problems. As noted earlier, problem solving can be a good thing, but the authors discuss how it often leads to rumination and overthinking. In doing mode, everything we do is through the lens of comparison—how it *could* or *should* be rather than how it *is*. Sounds like a typical day in the classroom, right?

The being mode, according to Williams and his colleagues, is different:

In being mode, we discover we can suspend evaluating how our experience “should” be or “ought” to be, of whether it is “correct” or “incorrect,” of whether it is “good enough” or “not good enough,” or of whether we are “succeeding” or “failing,” even whether we are “feeling good” or “feeling bad.” Each present moment can be embraced as it is, in its full depth, width, and richness, without a “hidden agenda” constantly judging how far our world falls short of our ideas of how we need it to be.
(p. 65)

If you’re picturing someone “experiencing the present” as a floating, unmotivated sloth, adjust that image. The authors stress, “We can still act with intention and direction” (p. 65). In fact, we’re more *intentional* in our actions when we’re mindful. Rather than stress-induced ruminations tainting our decisions, we act more objectively.

For example, imagine a student had an emotional meltdown yesterday. You may still be ruminating about it today. Today, that student starts to ask you some questions. If you’re in normal *doing* mode, you may feel your emotions rise as you think, “Here we go again. Another meltdown in progress.” Your focus narrows on all the things this kid does to annoy you. Judgment is now tainted with a host of emotions, many of which are overly reactive.

What if you could dampen the emotional overload for a moment and *observe* the student? What if you remained open to what the student needed—listening fully—and calmly helped him de-escalate his worry rather than escalating your own stress? Both the student *and you* would benefit from this moment of objective, rational thinking. Take it from mindfulness maestro Thich Nhat Hanh:

During the moment one is consulting, resolving, and dealing with whatever arises, a calm heart and self-control are necessary if one is to obtain good results . . . If we are not in control of ourselves but instead let our impatience or anger interfere, then our work is no longer of any value. (1975, p. 14)

Mindfulness is not being devoid of emotion. Instead, it is experiencing the present in full awareness. Consider these possibilities:

- Imagine being stuck behind that slow-moving first-year student and disengaging your stress, seeing instead an opportunity to look around and smile at students.
- Imagine eating lunch and savoring each bite, rather than mindlessly scarfing it down.
- Imagine seeing the uniqueness of the student in front of you, rather than having your mind ramble and rage about all the other things you *could* be doing.

Mindfulness is a full engagement in life. It is finding the richness in how life *is* instead of only seeing deficits in how life *could* or *should* be.

If it sounds like I'm getting fired up by this stuff, it's because I am. When I reached the end of my fuse with the most challenging, disrespectful class I ever taught, mindful breathing helped me stay rational and objective. When I came home after an exhausting day

of teaching, mindful awareness helped me keep a calm head, be patient with my colicky newborn son (and distraught wife), and still find joy in being a dad. Mindful awareness has brought more meaning, more gratitude, and more calm to my life as a teacher, a father, and a spouse than any other cognitive change.

Life Assignments

Mindfulness is an antidote to the ruminating, rambling habits that plague our well-being as teachers. Although the world of mindfulness is expansive, here are a few assignments incorporating research-based practices that have helped me develop a more mindful awareness, and a less ruminating and rambling mind.

Assignment #1: Use Mindfulness Triggers

You're probably already thinking, "When do I have time to meditate? I barely have time to eat lunch." We'll set aside the probability that we waste time doing mindless things. If you're looking for a brief boost of mindful awareness, use a *mindfulness trigger*.

First, identify a common event or situation in which you go into either rambling mode or negative rumination mode. Here are some examples:

- Rambling Triggers
 - Cleaning rituals (washing hands, cleaning dishes)
 - Sipping your morning beverage
 - Students walking into your classroom in the morning
 - Driving (e.g., pulling into a parking lot)
- Ruminating Triggers
 - Being stopped at a red light
 - Being stuck behind slow-moving students in the hallway
 - Having to wait in line
 - People driving on the expressway differently than you do
 - A colleague asking a ridiculous question near the end of a staff meeting

Once you identify a trigger, use it as a mental cue to take a few mindful breaths and shift your focus to the experience. For example, if you stop at a red light, rather than thinking, “I should have gone. I need to get where I’m going,” take a slow, deep breath. Focus on the air entering your lungs. Let your senses do their thing. You can also nonjudgmentally note whatever emotion you’re feeling, as in “I realize I’m feeling anxious to get to work.”

When you breathe, do so intentionally and slowly. Feel the air fill the bottom of your lungs first, lifting your stomach. Then focus on air filling up your lungs as your chest rises. Hold the breath for a few seconds. Then reverse the exhale, letting go of the air at the top of your throat, followed by your chest, then belly.

One byproduct of this mindful moment is the activation of our *parasympathetic nervous system*, which dampens our stress response (Jerath, 2006). Most people are familiar with the “fight-or-flight” response, which is triggered by the parasympathetic system’s opposite: the *sympathetic nervous system*. When we experience (or think about) something unpleasant, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in, cuing the release of more cortisol, a stress hormone.

So, rather than having a jammed copy machine trigger rumination and fight-or-flight-mode, we can use the experience to trigger a few deep, mindful breaths to activate the “rest-and-digest” mode via the parasympathetic system.

Assignment #2: Set Aside Unwired Time

My name is Chase, and I have an addiction. I’m addicted to my phone. I find myself subconsciously reaching for it and then absent-mindedly flipping through apps, checking my e-mail, checking social media sites over and over again. I used to catch myself multiple times a day getting stuck in an app-addiction cycle. I started to break the cycle with a simple approach: I scheduled some unwired, mindful time.

I now have a rule I try to follow each day. When I get home from work, I put my phone out of sight. I work to engage my attention on being present with my family. And when I go into autopilot and pat my pocket looking for my phone, I remind myself to be aware of what I'm experiencing in the moment.

Just as we sometimes need to schedule time to hang out with our friends, we can schedule time to hang out with the present moment. Whether it's five minutes or five hours, find time to disconnect from devices that divide your awareness.

Want to know just how important it is that you schedule unwired time? Download a phone-usage app and run it for a week. Prepare to be shocked.

Assignment #3: Meditate

If you *do* want to take mindfulness to the next level, look into practicing mindfulness meditation. Choosing from among the many programs available can be overwhelming, but the variety provides a lot of options. Much like physical fitness programs, you can find “mindful fitness” programs for any time commitment, level, and cost.

Types and costs. Different types of mindfulness programs may provide different benefits. Here's a list of categories and benefits, based on a study of 200 participants (Newman, 2017):

- **Presence**—Breathing meditations and body scans
 - Best for improving attention
- **Perspective**—Meditations that involve observing thoughts and becoming less reactive to them
 - Help regulate emotion to stay calm under stressful situations
- **Affect**—Emotional-attachment meditations such as “loving kindness”
 - Help regulate emotion and can promote compassion and altruism

Meditation programs. Here are a few examples of the many mindfulness meditation programs that are available:

- **MBSR-Umass** (<https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>)—One of the most highly researched and thorough programs is the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program from the University of Massachusetts. For those who don't have access to an MBSR class, MBSR offers detailed online courses.
- **Mindful Schools** (www.mindfulschools.org)—For a more education-specific focus, check out Mindful Schools, featuring different levels and durations of programs. There are even options to earn CEUs. These courses are a fraction of the cost of MBSR.
- **Palouse Mindfulness** (www.palousemindfulness.com)—Dave Potter took his training from MBSR onto the internet, creating Palouse Mindfulness. If you like the words *free* and *unscheduled*, take a look at this option.

Apps. You can also find plenty of apps with guided meditations and support. Here are some to consider:

- Insight Timer—a buffet of guided meditations
- Aura—a 3-minute, personalized, daily guided meditation
- Headspace—a 10-minute-a-day guided program with a buddy-system option
- Calm—another collection of guided meditations

Although apps are a good option for the time-strained teacher, keep in mind that an app is only a resource. Just as an app can't replace a high-quality teacher in education, an app can't replace instruction from a reputable, research-based mindfulness program.

Movement-based programs. If you like to move while you practice mindfulness, consider a program that has elements of mindful breathing and focus, such as yoga, tai chi, or Pilates. Join

that colleague who won't stop inviting you to a local class or scour the web for resources.

Assignment #4: Practice “Raisin Awareness”

When are you likely to be *least* mindful? When you're eating. No doubt you've had that moment when you've looked into a bag and thought, “Uh... did I really put down a half-bag of corn chips?” Yes. You probably did.

Try the mindful-eating experience. First, choose a food. Many mindfulness maestros recommend a raisin. I use an orange because (1) oranges are delicious, (2) I can use all the vitamin C I can get, and (3) they provide a rich multisensory experience for a mindfulness novice. Next, find an environment free of distractions. I also recommend doing this alone, otherwise you will feel (and look) like a weirdo. The goal is to slow down the experience of eating, focusing on each sense individually:

- **Touch and Sight.** Use your fingers to examine the food thoroughly. Notice every variation and what makes it unique. Bring your attention to the actual contact points on your fingers as you notice the texture and temperature.
- **Smell.** Waft some of the scent into your nostrils. Feel the sensation from the moment you note the way it smells to the air traveling down to your lungs.
- **Taste.** Focus on each bite and the various points of the experience: the feel of your teeth sinking in; the movement across your taste buds and under your teeth; the development of flavors; even the preparation of your swallowing reflex and how it feels when you bring that grub down to meet your stomach.

Any time your mind wanders to other thoughts (e.g., “I hope no one is watching me”), note them and bring your awareness back to the experience.

Assignment #5: Visualize Comic Clouds

Everything we do happens through the lens of a mood or an emotional state, which makes it hard to detach our experiences from our emotions. Most mindfulness gurus recommend noting thoughts and emotions as if they were in a cloud and then watching the cloud drift away in our mind. Noting. Drifting. Noting. Drifting.

When I first tried this strategy, I felt cartoonish. I began imagining myself in a comic strip (X-Men-like on a good day, Charlie Brown-like on a bad day), seeing myself from a third-person perspective. I would see my current experience with dialogue and thought bubbles and Morgan Freeman narrating, if the mood was fitting. The detachment might seem hokey, but there is some evidence that a third-person detachment can lower the intensity of negative affect, improve emotional regulation, and help with self-control (Moser et al., 2017; Wallace-Hadrill & Kamboj, 2016).

Assignment #6: Take a Weather Check

In Chapter 3, I discuss how the weather cues us to make mental comparisons: we instantly attach an evaluation to weather. We look out the window and either feel great because it's precisely how we want it or we get grouchy because it's not meeting our expectations.

Instead of wasting thoughts on what the weather *could* or *should* be, shift to a mindful awareness. Use the conditions outside to trigger a mindful moment. When you step into rain, take a few seconds to feel the sensations of the raindrops hitting your skin, to smell the damp soil. When the sun is blaring, feel the warmth on your skin and notice the hazy sky in the distance. In the winter, note the feel of icy air and melting snowflakes. Use the weather to practice mindful awareness.



Your mind is a classroom. It's filled with dozens of thoughts waving for your attention. But you have a choice. Do you let the thoughts run wild, or do you learn to manage them? Do you study them, or do you ignore them? Pursuing mindful awareness is like the pursuit of masterful teaching. It takes practice and time. But it's worth every effort.

We're not doomed to a life of rumination and rambling simply because we're teachers with a lot to think about. Nor are we destined to disappointment by the regrets of yesterday, the distance of tomorrow, or the contrast of what *is* to what *could* be. With mindful awareness, we can find fulfillment in every second we are awake, every breath we breathe, and every step we take.