

Mindfulness: The Power of Choice **By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.**

One of the greatest gifts to mankind is the power to change. Change is sometimes viewed from the mundane perspective of changing the type of clothes we wear, our hairstyle, the foods we eat, etc. Instead, what I want to emphasize is the amazing power that rests within every human being to change at a very deep level of his or her being.

We all have the ability to change our attitudes, our beliefs, our thinking patterns, our connection with others, etc. These important aspects of our lives are oftentimes so unconscious or out of awareness, that we don't realize how these underlying beliefs influence thousands of daily things we think and do on a regular basis. Yet, we each have the ability to change when we truly accept and put to use this natural talent.

By our very nature as a human being, we respond from moment to moment with choices, yet we are frequently ignorant about how our choices are dramatically shaping our lives. Our choices are not minor or frivolous. Our routine choices are monumental in shaping the quality of our lives and the fulfillment of our life purpose. Each decision we make is analogous to taking a chunk of clay and adding it to a piece of sculpture. Eventually, the sculpture begins to take form from our day-to-day decisions. Whether we ultimately love or dislike our sculpture is a key to our own happiness.

Our everyday choices determine whether or not we will create an empty life or a life full of meaning and purpose. When we wake up to how our choices determine our next moment and all the moments that follow, we begin to grasp how awesome this gift of choice truly is. Your ability to choose is so obvious, yet unfortunately, oftentimes ignored.

Practice Mindfulness

To appreciate the potential power in the choices you make, I encourage you to begin a conscious effort to be "mindful" as you go about your daily activities. Periodically ask yourself, "Am I behaving, saying, feeling, etc. in a way that will move me in the direction I want to go? Are my choices working for me or against me?" "Are my choices in alignment with my spiritual development, etc.?" In essence, I am suggesting we all try to live our lives with more intention and commitment.

To be mindful is to be consciously aware in the "here and now." Much of the time, we live in either the future (i.e. what if...) or in the past ruminating about what we did or didn't do. When we live in the present moment, we are able to experience life more fully and we are able to be less anxious. According to psychologist Fritz Pearls, Ph.D., anxiety occurs primarily in the gap between the time periods of now and the past or between now and the future. Anxiety is not anchored in the present (unless, of course, there is an actual threat to our being in the here and now.). Most of the time, the present is OK and it is our thoughts that make it not OK.

When people engage in the practice of mindfulness, they oftentimes utilize a tool such as a meditation practice to help them learn how to recognize when they are fully present and when they are drifting. Meditation is not for everyone; so don't be discouraged if it doesn't appeal to you. There are other strategies for being mindful. A wonderful book *The Power of Choice*

by psychologist and Buddhist practitioner, Tara Brach, Ph.D., Radical Acceptance, provides practical guidance, as do many other self-help books. But, if meditation appeals to you, I highly encourage it.

The key is to develop a practice of living each moment as fully as possible. Currently, a popular book by Eckhart Tolle, The Power of Now, clearly defines how living in the “now” can transform one’s life. When we wish that we were someplace else, with someone else, doing something else, we are cheating ourselves of living fully. When we focus on past regrets, shoulds, and could haves, we are stuck in the past and unable to appreciate the beauty of now. Viktor Frankl, author of Man’s Search for Meaning, said that even during work duty in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, some people would take a moment to notice and appreciate the beauty of a sunset. Not even the cruelty or squalor of the camps could rob these innocent victims of man’s universal yearning to seek the divine through nature and beauty.

Alex Pattakos, therapist and author of Prisoners of our Thoughts, and a student of Viktor Frankl’s, has said, “It’s not about finding the one big answer to the meaning of your life; rather, it’s about finding the meaning in every moment and day of your life.” His approach to therapy emphasizes the importance of seeking meaning in life, even through suffering. Pattakos reminds us that as thinking beings, it is easy to become locked up in our thoughts. Once we are prisoners of our negative thoughts, we will miss the true meaning in our relationships and all that we do. Let us remember Frankl’s ability to notice the beauty of a sunset, even in the worst of experiences. As we focus our thoughts, so shall we be and feel. The choice is always your own.

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