

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the creation of a playful, positive, and thoughtful view of the world. It has a number of key qualities. We need to create **new categories** lest we get trapped by old ones. New concepts lead to novel and playful ways to formulate and solve problems. For example, do you see a problem as a negative, as a difficulty, as a restraint, or as a challenge and an opportunity? To cast a problem as negative and as a difficulty is to regard it in typical fashion and restrict your opportunities. To view it as a challenge and an opportunity is to unleash new possibilities and avoid the shackles of the past. Playfulness, not consistency, is the basis for creative thinking. In fact, consistency has been described both as “the playground of dull minds” (Y. Harari) and “hobgoblin of little minds” (R. Emerson).

A mindful state also implies **openness to new information**. Keeping your mind open is no small feat. Our minds are filled with dogmatic beliefs that are difficult to escape and yet that is precisely what mindfulness requires.

Openness needs not only new information but also calls for **multiple perspectives**. We need limber and open minds because virtually all behavior can be cast in a negative or in a more positive light. We are less likely to get locked into old categories and negative views if we can avoid automatic, negative, and binary framing of the issue. Words matter; consider dogmatic versus firm, stubborn versus steadfast, impulsive versus spontaneous, rigid versus strong, and so forth. Frame the problem in positive ways for novel and better results.

Our life is what our thoughts make it (M. Aurelius). We can to a large extent **control our own contexts**. Our mindset can mediate our predicaments in positive ways. As Ellen Langer notes, the Birdman of Alcatraz sentenced to life in prison was able turn a dull, monotonous, and “absolute hell into a fascinating, mindful purgatory.” He discovered that boredom was just another construct of the mind for which he substituted the construct of learning.

Preoccupation with outcomes can foster mindlessness. Process, not outcomes, is key to mindful thinking. **Process precedes outcomes.** For example, plans are important, but planning is indispensable. Planning provides a flexible process whereas a plan too often becomes a static end. Process is a step-by-step procedure that facilitates ultimate outcomes. The process not only sharpens our judgments but also makes us feel positive about ourselves and the likelihood of successful outcomes.

In brief, ***mindfulness is the guardian of the mind: it facilitates a playful creation of new categories and ideas, openness to new information, an awareness of multiple perspectives, control over context, and a process perspective.***

For further development of mindfulness, see (Langer, 1985).