

Finding Peace by Staying Present



It is easy to get caught up in the events of the past or the future. However, doing so only brings worry and causes you to miss out on the present. On the other hand, mindfulness—or focusing on the present moment—leads to better health, lower anxiety, and greater resilience to stress (Greater Good, 2017a). There are several ways to increase one’s mindfulness, including learning to incorporate the concept of flow, limiting technology, meditating, and noticing nature. This fact sheet will give ideas on how to stay present by applying these principles.

Incorporating Flow

Have you ever enjoyed an activity so much that you did not feel time passing? This intense absorption and involvement with what you were doing in the present moment is called flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow is good for you because it is inherently pleasurable and fulfilling. In addition, this enjoyment is generally lasting and reinforcing, providing a natural high that is not accompanied by negative feelings (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Although it is easy to experience flow during our favorite activities, we can enjoy this feeling more often during other activities with practice. In time, experiencing flow will come more naturally. Here are some principles (Lyubomirsky, 2007) to keep in mind:

1. **Control your attention** – Try to keep your full attention on the task at hand. If your mind wanders, bring it back to what you are doing in the present moment. If you are having a conversation with another person, try to stay completely focused on what they are saying. Be kind and patient with yourself as you work to develop the ability to stay focused.
2. **Adopt new perspectives** – Try to enjoy life, even if it unfolds differently than you had planned. In

order to do so, incorporate these values into your life: 1) Be open to new and different experiences, and 2) Be willing to keep learning until the day you die.

3. **Recognize flow** – Many times we do not realize that we are having flow experiences. In order to create more of these in your life, you first have to recognize when they are happening so you can increase them.
4. **Transform routine tasks** – During the dull, everyday tasks that you must accomplish, seek to add microflow activities to make life more meaningful. For example, while you are waiting at the doctor’s office, you could draw a picture or read a book, or while you are cleaning the house, you could sing a song in your head. You may even seek to make your work more meaningful by striving to see it as your calling in life, instead of just as a necessarily evil job.
5. **Find the balance between challenge and skills** – Flow experiences occur when we are sufficiently challenged to the point that our skills are stretched, but not so much that the task seems daunting. Activities that challenge your skills too much result in anxiety, while activities that are not challenging enough result in boredom. Herein lies the paradox of flow experiences: the intrinsic rewards of engaging in these kinds of activities make you want to keep doing them, yet you must continue to keep stretching yourself because your progress will eventually leave you bored during the same experiences that were once exciting.

Finding activities that result in flow experiences is exhilarating. However, it is important that you do not become so engrossed in them that you neglect other people or responsibilities (Lyubomirsky, 2007). All things in moderation!

Limiting Technology

One major factor that can help you experience flow is to remove the distraction caused by using technology. Research shows that college students who check their phone frequently tend to experience higher levels of distress during their leisure time. Additionally, people who limit their email checking to three times per day have been found to be less tense and less stressed (Carter, 2015).

Limiting the time you spend using technology can be difficult. The following suggestions (Carter, 2015) can help you be less distracted by technology, and thus lower your stress level.

- **Monitor your technology use** – Install apps on your phone and/or computer that measure how often you check your email, social media apps, etc. Based on these measurements, set goals to reduce how often you check your phone or how long you spend using a specific app in order to remove distractions from your life.
- **Create a schedule** – Make a strategic decision about when you will check your email and messages. Schedule specific times that you will do so during the day. Tell your friends, family, and colleagues that you are trying to be less distracted by technology so they will know you are not ignoring them and they can support you and hold you accountable.
- **Remove distractions** – Have your phone go to sleep an hour before you go to bed. You may also consider removing email from your phone or setting it up on the back of your apps so that you are not constantly seeing it. It is the idea of “out of sight, out of mind.”
- **Focus on other things** – Do your most important work by filling your time with activities that bring you peace and fulfillment. When you reduce the amount of time that you are spending on your smartphone or computer, you will have more time to fill with meaningful activities.
- **Pat yourself on the back** – Savor the benefits of your effort. After all, why put forth the effort it takes to reduce your use of technology if you are not going to enjoy the benefits? Reward yourself for following through with your goals to reduce the distraction that technology is to you

Technology is useful for so many reasons, but at the same time can be a distraction from what is most important. As you take steps to limit your use of technology, you will feel more in control of your life and less stressed.

Meditating

Meditation is a practice that directs awareness inward, allowing you to contemplate, relax, and focus. Numerous studies (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2007) show that meditating regularly leads to several positive effects: increased happiness, less anxiety and depression, stronger immune response, increased sense of control in life, positive effects for several health conditions, higher intelligence and creativity, and greater empathy for others. Detaching from the world around you, strengthening your awareness, and increasing your attention to the present moment can be relaxing, reduce stress, and improve decision making and even relationships with others. While there are dozens

of styles of meditation practice, here are six principles (Lyubomirsky, 2007) that are important to keep in mind when practicing meditation:

1. **Be nonjudgmental** – Observe the moment without evaluating it as good or bad.
2. **Be “nonstriving”** – Focus more on the process of working toward your goals rather than just the achievement of them.
3. **Be patient** – Do not rush. Allow thoughts to unfold in their own time.
4. **Be trusting** – Trust yourself and trust that life will work out.
5. **Be open** – Notice and pay attention to the little details around you.
6. **Let go** – Set yourself free from unhelpful thoughts you have been dwelling on.

With these principles in mind, prepare yourself to meditate by doing the following (Lyubomirsky, 2007). You may find it helpful to set an alarm clock to help keep track of time. Begin with 3 minutes and work up to 5 minutes, and then longer periods of time.

- Sit alone in a comfortable place, such as in a chair or on the floor.
- Sit up tall, keep your back straight, and rest your hands in your lap.
- Close your eyes. If any part of your body is uncomfortable, shift to a new position.
- Direct your mind to your breath and begin counting your exhales. Set a goal to count 20 breaths and build up to more than 100 with practice.
- When your mind wanders, refocus by drawing awareness back to your breath and begin counting again in your mind. Some find it helpful to repeat a focus word each time they exhale, such as “thank you” or “peace.”

It is important to remember that much of what we worry and stress about is beyond our control. But we can control the state of our mind. Effective meditation takes practice. Because there are so many different approaches to meditation, it may be helpful to search online for other tips, methods, and practices. What is most important is to find what works for you.

Noticing Nature

Admiring the beauty in nature can invoke a strong sense of awe, which leads to feelings of joy and peace. However, too often we get in a hurry and miss opportunities to use nature as a way of helping us stay present. This is too bad because researchers have found that nature has

a calming effect that reduces feelings of distress and isolation (Greater Good, 2017b).

Even if you are not a nature lover, spending a little more time noticing the nature around you can still be beneficial. Try using the following suggestions (Greater Good, 2017b) to notice the beauty around you more often:

1. **Be mindful of your surroundings** – As you commute to work or school, run errands, or do any of the other hundreds of tasks you do on a daily or weekly basis, take a few moments to notice the nature around you. You can set reminders on your phone several times throughout the day if you have a hard time remembering to stop and notice nature.
2. **Focus on feelings** – As you stop to admire nature for a few minutes, notice how this makes you feel.
3. **Capture the moment** – When you see something in nature that evokes a strong emotion in you, take a picture. Even if the picture is not high quality or well designed, it will still remind you of the feelings you felt when you originally noticed what is in the picture.
4. **Jot down your thoughts** – Upload the photos you take to a place where you can write a brief description of why you took them. Include in your description the feelings you felt.
5. **Be consistent** – The more you focus on capturing these moments, the more admiring nature will become a habit.

Taking the time to notice the nature around you is a way to take a step back and view life from a different perspective. It does not have to take up more time in your day, but it does require paying extra attention to the nature that is already surrounding you. Doing so will help you savor the present moment.

Conclusion

As with all things, balance is key. It is very beneficial to stay present and enjoy the moment, but only as long as that does not mean that you give up on planning for the future and working toward your goals (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

With so many demands for your time and energy every day, life can get overwhelming. Incorporating the concept of flow, limiting the distraction of technology, meditating, and noticing nature will help you stay present and thus refocus on what is most important and cherish your daily life experiences.

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