



SESSION 1

Attention and the Now

ATTENTION

Attention focuses our awareness on a specific experience (Western, 1999). This process can be compared to the operation of a flashlight. Attention is like the light from the flashlight that illuminates a specific area, making it visible to the one who is holding the light. Thus, attention allows us to make things “visible”. In other words, by paying attention, we can become aware of things.

Focused attention can be compared to the operation of a flashlight, where the illuminated object represents the focus of our awareness.



When it comes to attention, two different elements are at work:

1. The one that demands attention and
2. The one that regulates attention

Ad 1. External stimuli (such as noise, a handsome passerby, or an advertisement on TV) but also internal stimuli (such as feelings, emotions, or thoughts) may require attention. For example, when we suddenly hear a loud bang, our attention is automatically directed to this sound. The same is true for internal stimuli. Thus, a worrisome thought can also draw our attention and distract us from what we are doing.

Ad 2. Everybody has the will or ability to focus and regulate attention. When a loud bang draws our attention, we can decide to focus on what we were doing before. This process is called attention regulation and is a specific form of self-control. According to some researchers, attention regulation is the most important form of self-control. This is because attention plays a central role in all other forms of self-regulation, such as the regulation of emotions, impulses, and thoughts (see, for example Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994).

The extent to which we are able to regulate our attention is strongly related to well-being and is a strong predictor of happiness, satisfaction with social relationships, resistance to temptations, and academic performance (Duckworth & Seligman 2005; Kelly & Conley 1987; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone 2004). The good news is that control of attention can be trained (Tang et al, 2007; Oaten and Cheng, 2006), which is what we will do during the course.

The training of attention is essential in mindfulness. Mindfulness teaches us to focus the attention on what is happening in this moment, the now. Although this sounds easy, it seems that we often just do not live in the moment and instead, focus our attention on our thoughts or the content of our thoughts. When we look back at the previously discussed dichotomy of the elements at work here, one could say that thoughts belong to the first category in that they require attention. Mindfulness appeals to the second category, the one that regulates attention. Mindfulness exercises are a form of training attention.

In line with the above, studies have shown that mindfulness training improves attention and self-control (Chambers, Yee Lo, & Allen, 2008; Fetterman, Robinson, Ode and Gordon, 2010; Tang et al, 2007; Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & Goolkasian, 2010).

THE PRESENT MOMENT

Of all the things that can draw our attention, we pay relatively little attention to the now. Rather, our attention is directed towards the past or the future. As we are taking a shower in the morning, we rarely pay attention to showering itself and the sensations that it entails. Instead, we are focusing on the things that need to be done that day or the things that we did day before.

Mental “tools”, like thinking and planning, can be very useful. However, at the same time, they can cause emotional imbalance because we are often not able to stop thinking and planning, even when it is not required. They are powerful tools that are often difficult to dismiss. Consequently, we think about rather than actually experience life.

The present moment is all there is, yet we often pay very little attention to it

Concerns about the future, regrets about the past, comparing oneself with others, and constantly thinking about how things could be better are examples of typical thoughts. Constant thinking makes it impossible to fully enjoy a nice meal, a nice concert, or falling rain. This constant thinking not only distracts our thoughts and attention from the here and now, but when thoughts are negative, they can also cause problems, such as anxiety or stress.

Mindfulness can help us realize that thoughts are not reality. By focusing our attention on the present moment, we free ourselves from obsessive thinking and connect with our direct experience rather than a mental story. Soon we realize that in this moment, right here and right now, there is rarely an actual problem.

Being able to connect with the present moment has clear benefits. Research has shown that people who are more mindful are in general happier (Drake, Duncan, Sutherland, Abernethy, & Henry, 2008) and report less anxiety, depressive discomforts, anger, and worries (Baer, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Greeson & Brantley, 2008; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). A higher degree of mindfulness is also associated with reduced stress and increased gratitude, hope, and vitality (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cardaciotto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra, & Farrow, 2008; Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmueller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006).

EXERCISE: THE BODY SCAN

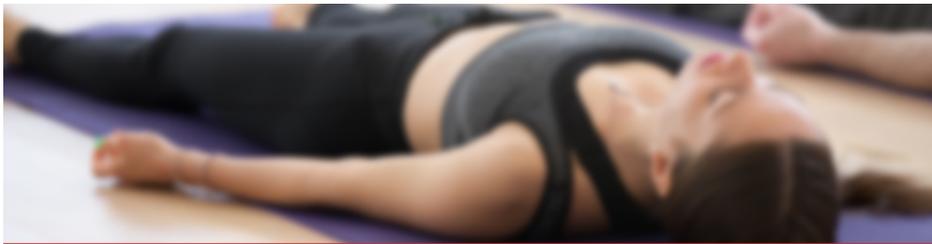
The body scan, as the name suggests, entails bringing awareness to each part of the body, starting with the feet and moving up from there.

Tips for the body scan:

1. During meditation, you may get distracted, fall asleep, find your mind wandering, and/or feel body sensations. Consider that it is a part of and a challenge of the exercise. There is no right or wrong way to meditate. The moment you realize that you are not present in the exercise, you are in fact already present. Simply realizing that you are not present is a success, and the non-presence makes success possible.
2. If your mind wanders a lot, consider these thoughts as passing events, nothing special). Then try to gently bring your attention back to the body scan in the present moment.
3. Try not to focus on ideas such as “success”, “failure”, “doing really well”, or “trying to relax the body.” The body scan is not a competition; it is not a skill to be achieved. The only thing that is important and that really helps is practice.
4. Try to approach your experience with an accepting attitude, or in other words, allow it to just happen, “that’s just how it is right here, right now.” If you try to avoid, suppress, or expel unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations, chances are high that they will just return more often.

INFORMATION: THE BODY SCAN

- The body scan teaches us to recognize and experience physical sensations. Much of our attention focuses on our thoughts and on matters outside our body, such as our job, social environment, etc. This increases the risk that one will pay very little attention to physical signals. The recognition of physical signals, such as tension or restlessness, is important, especially for the prevention of stress and burn-out (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). The body scan is a method used to get more in touch with body sensations and signals and to become familiar with them.



The body scan teaches us to recognize and experience physical sensations

- The body scan allows us to experience the noise of our thoughts through our bodies. The simple instruction binds attention to one part of the body at a time, which can be much more difficult than one might initially think.
- The body scan teaches us to draw attention to a specific point. In the body scan, the point of attention is one part of the body. The effect of such training of attention can also transfer to other areas, such as focusing (concentrating) the attention on a specific task, a conversation with someone, etc.
- The body scan method teaches us to detect when attention wanders. Being able to notice when attention wanders is a critical component of successful self-control. The self-control literature uses the term “monitoring” to describe this function (for more information see: Carver, 2004).
- The body scan can provide insight into the nature and pattern of thoughts in general. This would allow you to notice recurring themes of thoughts that are played repeatedly like an old record.
- The body scan teaches us to cultivate self-compassion. Rather than

criticizing ourselves for being distracted, attention is returned to the body, gently without judgment.

AT HOME

- Try to do the body scan (short or long) at home. The more repetitions, the greater the effect. The best would be to do the body scan daily. However, if you cannot, try to practice as often as possible.

Advice:

Choose a fixed time and place. It can help enormously to reserve a certain time of day on your calendar for the exercise.

- Tip: Choose one (or more) routine activities, such as brushing your teeth, cycling home, eating, doing the dishes, going to the supermarket, taking a walk, and the like, and try to do the activity with full attention. In other words, try to focus on the act just as you try to focus your attention on a certain body part during the body scan.
- During the next week, choose routine activities on which you will consciously focus your attention. List those activities below:

1

2

3

- During the next week, try to pay attention to how you engage in a conversation. Try to focus on the conversation as fully as possible and the person/persons with whom you are communicating. The moment you notice that your thoughts are distracted, return your attention to the conversation. Try to be as present as possible.

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

TUESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

WEDNESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

THURSDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

FRIDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

SATURDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

SUNDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

NOTES
