

Getting Present: The Only Way Out is in

by Lisa B. O'Shea - Posted October, 2011

The Brain is an Optimizing Machine

The human brain is an amazing thing. It is constantly on the lookout for ways to optimize things. Everything it looks at it picks apart, decides what is lacking, and starts thinking up possible improvements. This is our genetic legacy and what is responsible for us having remote controlled vehicles on Mars and gene therapy to correct blindness. It is a wonderful miracle of luck/evolution/divine intervention but completely overbuilt for most of our daily human needs.

Much of our brain power is spent thinking about the past and the future. When you get into bed at night, are you aware of the feel of the sheets on your skin, the pillow under your head, the comfort of the blanket? Instead, are you endlessly revisiting every action you took that day and every word you said? Are you arranging all of these thoughts like so many ceramic tiles, into a mosaic picture only to pull it all apart and lay them out again and again?

Perhaps you do this all day long as well. In the middle of some one talking to you, your mind sneaks back to chew on some juicy thoughts. It is as if there were a team of miniature copies of you (mini-me's) all working simultaneously on different projects. As your energy gets divided up to run all these mental activities, your stress increases. This happens to everyone - driving the car, working on a project, playing with your children, eating a meal. Our minds are so far away, so distant from what is in front of us. Decades of thinking in this manner create a pattern that is as relentless as the tides of the ocean.

Layered Thinking Creates Adrenaline Overload

The result of all this layered thinking (thinking on top of thinking) is an adrenalin overload. The body is in a constant fight or flight mode with increased respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, and your immune system on red alert. This chronic hyperactive state has a lingering effect on the human body resulting in serious life limiting disorders - anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, exhaustion, etc.

Many people mistakenly think that they need to change "how" they are thinking in order to correct this. However, you cannot "think" your way out of thinking. It is like paying off credit card debt with another credit card. The only way out is through cessation of layered thinking. A person needs to cultivate the ability to focus on what they are doing, one action at a time, with awareness. When you are at home you put down the thoughts of work and at work you are not carrying the thoughts of home. This is called being present.

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Getting Present

Getting present literally means that when you are doing something, you are aware and doing only one thing. It is not per se a “spiritual practice”, i.e. related to development of compassion or betterment of the person although it is practiced by many spiritual people. This means you do not already have to be in a relaxed and balanced state to get present. Getting present is what will help you to be in a relaxed and balanced state.

Getting present is not a philosophical concept. It just means that when you are eating an apple, you are actually aware of the apple (taste, texture, smell, movement of your jaw) not also driving the car, talking on the phone, planning your future, evaluating and grading your performance of your day. Getting present is a simple task but requires lots of practice.

Although our ultimate goal is to be present doing normal daily activities, it is helpful to start out with an easier task. Step by step we can build the skills for being present like any behavior we have learned over the years.

Techniques for Getting Present

The following exercises are in increasing levels of complexity. Start with level 1 and work your way up. Practice the exercises throughout the day, at least 4-6 times.

1. **Mindful Touch:** Place your hand on any object within reach. Notice its texture, temperature, size. If it is a small object, pick it up and feel its weight in your hand. Note all tactile sensations. “I am aware that this is cold...” Continue this for as long as your attention will hold.
2. **Mindful Breath:** Become completely still. Begin inhaling. Be aware of the beginning of the inhale “I am aware that I am breathing in.” Be aware of inhaling all the way until it is completed, “I am aware that I am done inhaling.” Begin exhaling. Be aware of the beginning of the exhale, “I am aware that I am exhaling.” Follow the exhale until it is completed, “I am aware that I am done exhaling.” Tune into the feeling of each part of the breath. Pause for a moment to notice the stillness. Repeat as long as your attention will hold.
3. **Mindful Walking:** Stand for a moment and breathe mindfully. Begin to take a small step forward. As your heel begins to touch the floor, be aware of the feeling of contact on your heel. Slowly roll the rest of your foot down onto the floor and be aware of the feeling of contact with each part of your foot as it touches the floor. Be aware of the other foot as the heel starts to lift off the floor behind you. Be aware of the transfer of weight to the front foot as the back foot lifts completely off the floor. Be aware as you step forward with the back foot and the heel touches the floor. Continue taking small steps with awareness for as long as your concentration will hold. Each step is very slow: 2-3 times slower than normal walking pace.

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4. Mindful Work: Choose any daily activity to do with mindfulness such as cleaning, doing dishes, brushing your teeth, eating breakfast, or doing laundry. As you begin the activity, take a few mindful breaths. Move 2-3 times slower than you usually do for the activity. Be aware constantly of the tactile sensations as you work. Be aware of your breathing and your body.

5. Mindful Discussion: Find a discussion partner who would like to practice with you. Before you begin practicing this, set your intention to listen mindfully and then take a few mindful breaths. As your partner begins to speak, listen to each word the person says. Feel your awareness of your partner. Do not think about your response to your partner until they have completely finished speaking - just listen. When it is your turn to talk, speak slowly and thoughtfully with awareness of what you are saying as each word is spoken. Do not rehearse the words, just let them appear. Do not think about your partner's upcoming response. Continue speaking and listening for as long as your concentration will hold.

6. Mindful Listening: Practice the method of Mindful Discussion with anybody you are speaking with even though they do not know you are practicing it. Listen mindfully when they are speaking. Speak mindfully when they are listening. Do not think about what you will say next while your partner is speaking. Wait until it is your turn to talk to "think" about what you are going to say. You will find that the words will be there without needing to rehearse them.

Note: Planning your future is not forbidden - it just needs to be done while you are present, not as a add-on while you are doing something else. As you plan what you would like, write it down. If you want to revisit the plan that day, train yourself to sit down and give it all your attention once again. You will find that your ability to plan will improve and your ability to enjoy the other activities in your life will as well.

Resources:

Eckhart Tolle, [The Power of Now](#) - a classic, helps you to understand how the mind can turn against itself

Thich Nhat Hanh, [Present Moment Wonderful Moment](#) and his other many books all help to create a gentle way of connecting to our present moment.

Jeffrey Brantley, [Calming your Anxious Mind](#) and [Daily Meditations for Calming your Anxious Mind](#) - Dr. Brantley is from Duke University and gives a scientific basis for the benefits of training your mind to focus on the present moment instead of ruminating excessively on the past or future. The exercises that he offers in the book are easy to do and quite helpful.

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