

Calm Before the Storm

Today is the fourth in a series of articles on mindfulness. Thus far, the feedback has been very positive. I am grateful to everyone who has given compliment to these articles. To review, mindfulness is a way to lower stress and improve health. The process is to pay attention to the present moment without judgment. The elements of mindfulness to explore this week include two things. The first is to notice when you are not mindful. The second is not to have any self-judgment when this happens.

After you begin to practice mindfulness it is common to ask, “Is this working? Am I doing this right?” One of the best things that can happen is to notice when you are not being mindful. When you slip into “auto pilot” it gives you great feedback. It is wise to understand that one of the best ways to learn mindfulness is by noticing when you are being unmindful. I have an example in my own life to illustrate and clarify.

This last 4th of July weekend I went to the local Safeway and I was in a hurry. I needed something from the deli-counter and I will admit to you that I was not present. I was on “auto pilot”. The deli-counter in Safeway is big and there is no system to determine who is next in line. Because it was a holiday weekend, it was very crowded. When I approached the counter for service, I unknowingly cut in front of those waiting ahead of me. There was an uproar of anger and impatience from several people including myself. I felt embarrassed and left with a chip on my shoulder. I did not intend to create upset at the deli-counter, but I did.

It was not until after I got home that I realized how unmindful I had been. For a brief second I became guilty about what had happened. I was hard on myself and judged myself as disrespectful. I imagined a fantasy scenario in which someone at the store recognized me and said, “Isn’t that Dr. McQuaid, the guy who is supposed to be mindful? What a sad example.” My next thought was, “Oops”.

The experience of being unmindful offers a wonderful opportunity for self-analysis rather than self-judgment. It is wise to use such incidents as educational experiences and not as a reason to wallow in guilt. I can look at the situation and reflect on how not to make the same mistake. I may not be able to eliminate these situations 100%, but I can set an intention to reduce their occurrence. Upon reflection, I saw the experience as an opportunity for self-forgiveness. To recognize it is human to slip into “auto pilot” means I don’t have to be harsh on myself or others.

Another realization I discovered is that these moments give us permission to resolve our downside. It is healthy to admit our faults and forgive our humanness. The same episode has happened to everyone visiting a deli-counter at one time or another. We all have inadvertently cut someone off whether at the store or while driving. Because we can all relate to this, one can then identify how best to be mindful in future situations. Mindfulness gives us the chance to resolve our shadow side gradually and gently. We discover we can change; we can do better, one moment at a time.

The example I gave of losing touch with mindfulness is one we all experience. We all have said to ourselves, "I wish I had that moment back." Mindfulness gives us the chance to get in front of situations that can lead to upset. Our intention is be calm in the split second prior to the storm. This gives us a whole new range of options of how to respond to stress, rather than react to stress. With practice, you will catch yourself before you get upset. When you lose the present moment and you wish you had it back, you are making great progress. Like steering a ship, we move from on course to off course to correct again and get back on course.

The mindfulness exercises today is an extension of the breathing exercise we have already learned. Do this exercise for ten minutes. Begin with your hand below your naval and take a breath in through your nose drawing air past your chest into your belly. Expand the belly on the inhale and contract the belly on the exhale. Close your eyes and pay attention to your breath. Follow the breath in and follow it out. See how long you can stay with the breath before the mind wanders off. What we are noticing is that the mind has a mind of its own. We are discovering that despite concentration and focus on the breath, the mind wants to come in and disrupt our attention. We don't make ourselves wrong about this. The discovery is the same as my experience at Safeway. The more I notice how unmindful I am, the more mindful I become. So don't think, "Am I doing this right?" The more you notice how unmindful you are, the more progress you make.

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