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DIGITAL GUIDE



Train Your Brain to

**BREAK
HABITS**



Trust the Process

We're all creatures of habit. And we're all creatures of bad habit. Habits of wanting. Habits of distraction. Habits of resistance. Habits of stress. Anything else that may feel constricting or controlling. Fortunately, as neuroscientist, psychiatrist, and thought leader in the field of habit change and the science of self-mastery Dr. Judson Brewer says, we form habits in a very specific way that can be observed, examined, and even altered. But first we need to understand how it all works.

In this guide you'll learn about forming and maintaining habits and find practices that will help you create the space to notice your habits and replace them with behaviors that will

serve you in longlasting ways. As you explore your own habits, remember to be gentle with yourself. Behaviors you want to change may have brought you comfort at a particular time. Mindfulness connects us with our deepest intentions and shines a light on behaviors that don't serve to help support our intention to make changes. Be curious and open to exploring the reasons you do the things you do. Approach your discoveries with self-compassion. And remember that change (no matter how big or small) takes time. Trust yourself and trust the process of practice.

The Mindful Editors

mindful
healthy mind, healthy life

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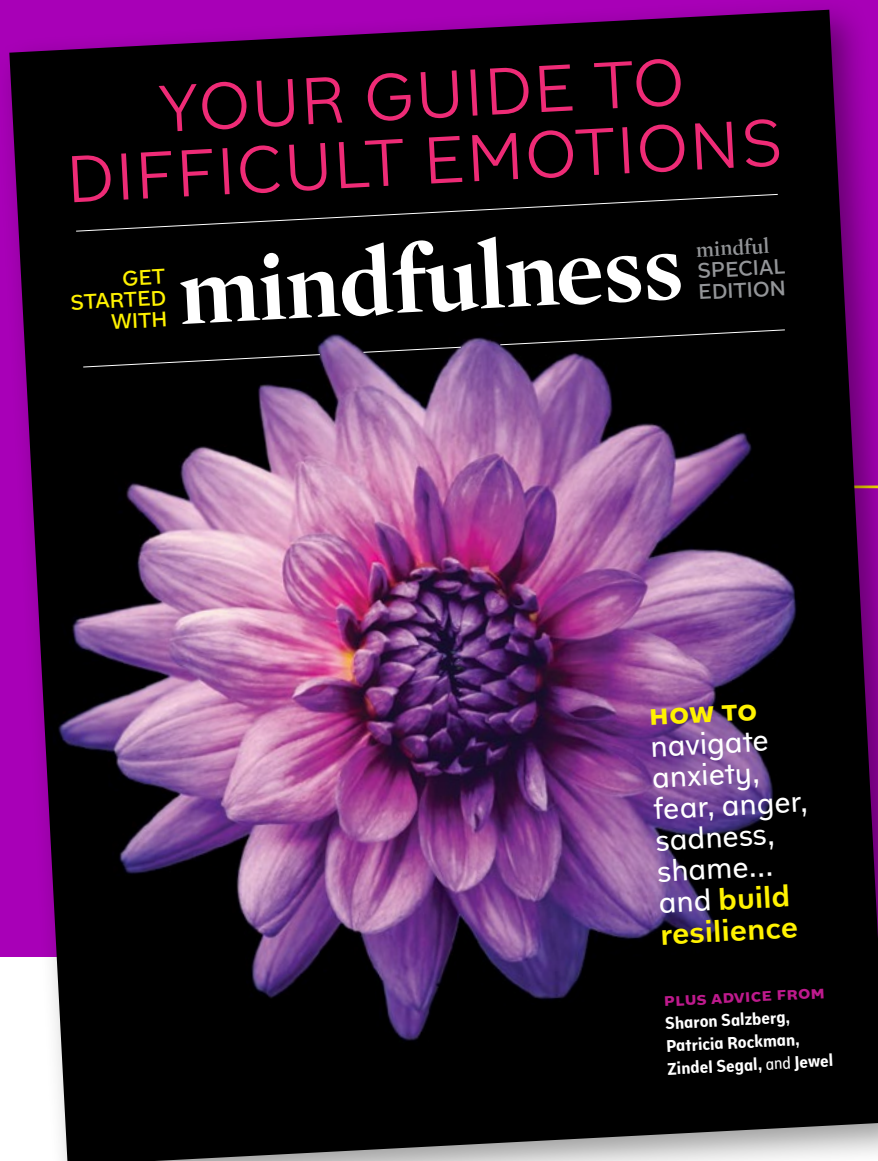


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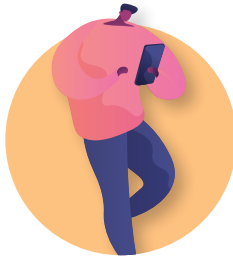
contents

Practices



4 Hack Your Brain's Habit Loops

A practice for recognizing when our habit loops flare, and observing our mind and body when that happens.



6 Unhook From Your Phone

Learn to hack into the rewards-based learning system that our brains often operate on so we can regain control of our attention.

Habit Change



8 Are You a Creature of (Bad) Habits?

Yes. We all are. Fortunately, a few simple steps can help you break the cycle of unhealthy actions and develop the skills to cultivate good ones.



5 Rewire Your Food Cravings

Bringing awareness to our cravings can change our relationship to them—we can be with that feeling rather than get caught up in it.



7 Tame Your Feelings of Anxiety

By understanding the stress and anxiety habit loops present in our lives, we can eventually ease ourselves into different behaviors around these difficult emotions.



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Hack Your Brain's Habit Loops

By Judson Brewer

We form habits in a very specific way, which is great news. It means this is a system that can be observed, examined, and even altered. But first we need to understand how it all works. There is a pretty simple, and consistent, formula when it comes to forming (and maintaining) habits: there's a trigger; there's an accompanying behavior; and there's a result or reward.

For example, let's look at habits that get formed around smoking cigarettes: There could be stress (trigger) that moves someone to go outside for a cigarette (behavior); and then, for a brief time, that initial stress is reduced (reward). Our brains simply recognize that a particular behavior—in this case, smoking—alleviates, however briefly, the feelings that the initial trigger sparks in us. So with that reward of lowered stress, the brain says, essentially: go do that behavior again.

So, what we want to begin doing with this practice is notice our own habit loops and get more adept at observing their mechanics. It's helpful to think in terms of gears here: Being in habit mode is like being on autopilot—we go through our day, habitually reacting to whatever stimuli we encounter. But first gear is recognizing what our habits are. And this basic practice can help you get there.

1 Get comfortable and anchored in your physical body. You can be standing, sitting, or lying down for this practice. Bring your awareness to the physical sensations in your body or your breath—whatever is most available to you. Be curious. Ask yourself: What does my breath feel like right now?

2 Become aware of any thoughts that are arising. Maybe you're encountering a few triggers already: thoughts spurring you to think about the past or the future; regrets, fantasies, planning for next week or anticipating your next vacation. Each time a trigger-like thought arises, simply note it as "trigger" or "thinking." If you

wake up in the midst of a fantasy, regret, worry, or thought, note that as "thinking" as well. Check in with the attitude of your mind from time to time, too: *Am I resisting thoughts or trying to make them go away? Am I holding on to certain thoughts?* If that's the case, simply notice resistance or craving. See if you can bring a curious attitude to it all instead of judgment. That way, you'll be primed to investigate and notice what thought streams arise rather than get caught up in them.

3 Become aware of any type of habit loop that arises. As you grow in awareness of your physical sensations and your thoughts, plant in this mind-stream an aspiration to look out for any type of habit loop. Maybe a craving has occurred to you? Maybe a desire to check your phone? If noticing triggers or habit loops or specific mental behaviors seems like too much, simply stay grounded in the physical sensations of your breath or your body.

ILLUSTRATION BY VISUAL GENERATION / ADOBESTOCK



Rewire Your Food Cravings

By Judson Brewer

Imagine being out in the wilderness. When hungry and looking for food, our brains aim to record our successes because we need to eat to stay alive. We spot some bright berries (trigger); we eat a berry (behavior); and if we find that the berry provides us fuel and even taste good, we've set the groundwork for the habit loop that will propel us to eat those berries again.

But most of us do not live in the wilderness anymore. Point being, our brains don't necessarily need this reward-based learning system to help us remember where we can find food. That system is still at play—only now it operates with other types of triggers and foods. For example, if we reach for ice cream every time we get stressed out, our brain starts to learn to eat when we're stressed. Because when we do, we feel some stress relief (albeit brief).

Whether it's celebratory, stress-based, or even boredom or sadness that triggers us to eat, once our brains make a habit loop that includes eating food as a go-to behavior in response to a particular trigger, our brains set the tracks: "That was good; I feel a bit better; let's do it again." So this is the focus of our practice: any types of habits we may have formed around eating.

1 Settle into a comfortable position. Anchor your awareness in your body and mind. This helps to orient us around our mind—because if our mind is drifting off, it's difficult to identify, observe, and map out habit loops. We need that steady awareness, too, to map the different types of rewards that we get from habits. Let's focus on what's actually happening for us in the first part of the equation: trigger and behavior.

2 Bring to mind your favorite food. You may imagine what it smells and tastes like. Take it further: What are the qualities of the sensations of that food on your tongue, in your mouth? Is it cool? Soft and delicate? Crunchy? Spend some time with these sensations.

3 Notice the type of reaction that your body has simply by bringing up the memory of this food. What are you experiencing in your body? Maybe you now have a craving for that food, even if you've just eaten, even if you're not hungry at all. If you do find yourself in the midst of a craving, what does that feel like in your body and mind? Are there physical sensations associated with it?

4 Try to notice any changes in the sensations associated with your craving. Is there a predominant sensation in your body right now? Are you finding tightness? Is there a sensation of heat? What happens as you bring your awareness fully to those sensations?

5 Come back to the breath. Gently bring your attention away from your craving, and bring your awareness back to your body or your breath. Bringing awareness to the craving itself can change our relationship to it—we can be with that craving rather than be caught up in it.



Unhook From Your Phone

By Judson Brewer

Let's say you have a project that's due and you feel like you're way behind on it. How does that feel? I think we can all agree: it doesn't feel great. And it's a sensation that can definitely trigger behaviors that have nothing to do with working on that project.

If your brain's anything like mine, one of the ways I might deal with this uncomfortable feeling is to distract myself from it. And one of the ways I've become accustomed to doing that is through the technology I have on my phone. Project deadline bearing down? Suddenly checking my newsfeed becomes a priority. And getting a bit of news, seeing that someone liked my last post, and laughing at someone's tweet all feels a little bit better—for a few moments anyway—than facing my dreaded deadline. Our phones are masterfully designed weapons of mass distraction, and it's so easy to get sucked into that distraction.

Why? Because they're powerful delivery systems of information that speak directly to our personal lives and views. Add to that something we call "intermittent reinforcement," meaning we don't know when we're going to get that next text, tweet, or email alert. Studies have shown that this is the most powerful kind of learning for a human brain. Let's observe how all this actually works on us.

1 Get comfortable and simply hold your phone in your hand. Feel its weight and structure. Now take a moment to look down at it. And then go back to feeling your phone in your hand. You're anchored in your awareness of your body and breath and you're inviting your phone into that territory.

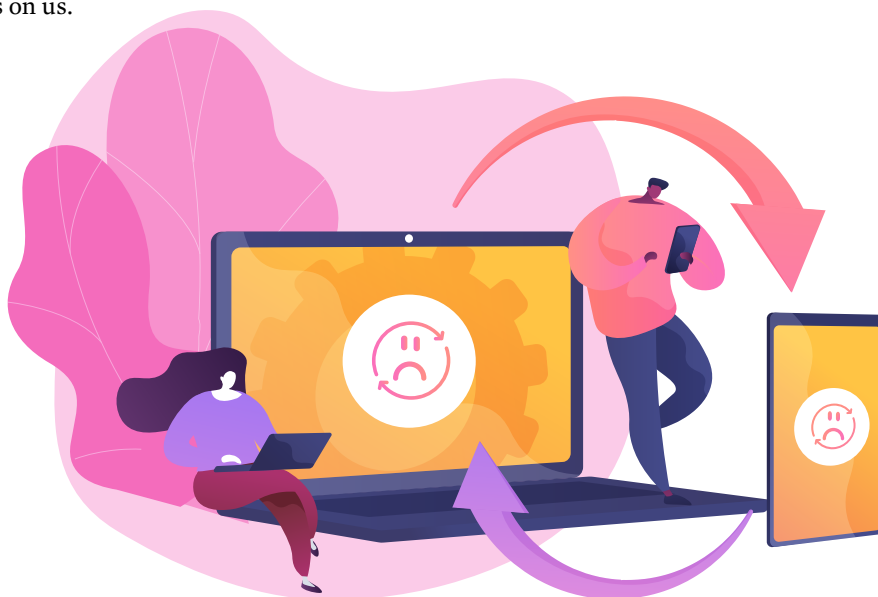
2 Look at the blank screen of your phone without turning it on. Can you notice anything happening in your body simply from holding your phone? Do you detect any restless anticipation? How about an internal voice that implores you to check your email? Simply notice anything that's arising and continue to gaze at your phone.

3 If thoughts emerge, simply note them as "thinking," and bring your awareness back to your phone. Check in with your body. Any sensations such as nervousness?

4 Do you feel an urge to check that text you just heard arrive or see who called you a few minutes ago? Take a moment to track what that feels like in your body. Drop in and notice the qualities of that urge.

5 Now try to simply open your phone to its home screen. Notice what that feels like as you look at the screen. Can you hold there, without checking anything further, and explore what's going on in your body? See if you can bring your awareness right into that sensation. I could check my social media. I could check my email. What does that feel like in that space before acting?

6 Put your phone down now and take a moment. Drop back into your embodied experience. Return to your breath and your body as you place your phone away from you. If you notice that your heart is racing, just take a couple deep, conscious breaths.



Tame Your Feelings of Anxiety

By Judson Brewer

Considering our ever-present to-do lists is usually enough to spike a bit of anxiousness. A common response to that is to start planning and thinking about all the ways we're going to get our to-do list done. But if we pause and try to notice what's really happening, we may find that this loop—let's call it a worry loop—doesn't actually get that to-do list done. Then, inevitably, we go back to look at the list again (back to the trigger), and now it's even later in the day or week, and that to-do list is still just as big.

You might be feeling anxious right now just thinking about all this. Take a few breaths. And be reassured that our goal here is to better understand the stress and anxiety loops present in our lives. We're looking at the component parts so that we can map out the habit loop and eventually ease ourselves into different behaviors around stress and anxiety.

1 As you settle into a comfortable, quiet spot, simply bring your awareness to your breath and your body. What sensations are most predominant for you right now?

2 Now, if you have a particular loop around stress or anxiety or worry, see if you can bring to mind one of those minor triggers for you. It could be your to-do list, or maybe it's just one thing you need to get done. Simply bring whatever it is to mind. At the same time, see if you can bring a wide-open, kind, curious awareness to it.

3 Try to notice how your mind and body react to this. Does your mind spiral? Notice what this feels like in your body, too. Do you feel a tightness, heat, vibration, restlessness? Just map where you feel it most. Notice all you can about how this feels in your body.

4 Rest with whatever you discover. It doesn't matter what the answer is. The point of this is to experience a different way of being with whatever is right now. The point is to have all these feelings and be curious about them. It's in this way that we can begin to hack the rewards-based learning system that drives us in the direction of contraction. Simply by bringing a curious awareness to these feelings, we can open up that experience further.

5 Try this: whenever you feel worry rising and perhaps a growing tightness in response to that, try to tap into curiosity. Try to just be with those thoughts and body sensations rather than do something about them. Being rather than doing—see what that feels like by comparison.

6 Ask yourself as you explore: How good does worrying feel? And how good does curiosity feel? Even if you find that you are not curious, simply explore that: Why am I not curious about this? Sometimes that's enough to get curiosity to pop into gear. When you're ready, gently bring yourself back to the breath.

ILLUSTRATION BY VISUAL GENERATION / ADOBESTOCK





Are You a Creature of (Bad) Habits?

Yes. We all are. Fortunately, a few simple steps can help you break the cycle of unhealthy actions and develop the skills to cultivate good ones.

CRAVING

By Hugh Byrne
Illustrations by Karin Rönmark

Consider these two experiences:

It's a crisp early autumn day as you begin walking through the woods, sensing fall in the coolness of the air on your face. You see the play of light and shade as the sun shines through the leaves swaying in the breeze. You feel the weight of your body on your feet as you walk along the path, and feel the beating of your heart as the path inclines up a hill. You hear the chirp of the birds, the sound of the season's last cicadas, and the distant rumble of a truck. Thoughts of daily life come and go, but don't interfere with your enjoyment of the simple pleasure of a walk in the woods. Nothing special, yet you feel alive and present, open to your experience and to life.

Take the same setting, but this time as you begin to walk your mind is caught up in worries about all the work you have to do and fears that something important will fall through the cracks. You remember a difficult encounter with your boss earlier in the week and worry about what that might mean for your future. This thought hooks on to concerns about the poor grades your teenage son received on his latest report card, and worries about the friends he's been hanging out with. You take your phone out of your pocket to see if any important messages have landed in your inbox since you began your walk.

You're barely aware of your surroundings as your focus is consumed by your anxious thoughts. Like a seesaw, your mind flips back to ruminating on the past and forward into fears and anxiety about the future. If you stopped to pay attention, you might notice that your body is tense and tight, reflecting your mental state. You're distant from your bodily experience and your environment.

It's easy to develop patterns and habits that take us away from our present experience into rumination, worry, and fear, which, in turn, lead to stress and suffering. It's easy to slip into overeating or

over-drinking or other unhealthy behaviors without awareness, offering momentary relief but separating us from our deepest intentions.

Fortunately, mindfulness provides practices and skills to help us change unhealthy habits and live in greater harmony with life.

Bringing attitudes of mindfulness to unwanted habits

Different kinds of habits have different feelings associated with them, but all can be changed when met with a kind, interested, and accepting awareness. There are four main categories of habits—habits of *wanting*; habits of *distraction*; habits of *resistance*; and habits of *doing*—that encompass many of the most common behaviors we seek to change.

HABITS OF CRAVING

Habits of wanting, craving, or addiction have an energy and feeling tone of moving toward something we desire. The body and mind focus in on the object, be it a drink, drugs, food, cigarettes, or sex, or any other object of desire, and our sense of well-being and happiness becomes tied to getting what we crave. Working mindfully with habits of wanting means opening fully to the feeling of wanting as it manifests—in the body, the emotions, and the mind. If something triggers the urge, you can open to the sensations, feelings, and emotions and say “yes” to them and meet them with kindness, interest, and acceptance. If a thought arises, such as, “I’ll feel better if I have a smoke/drink,” meet that thought with kindness. Choose to stay with what’s alive in the body and the emotions without acting on it. When you learn to stay with the uncomfortable, unpleasant, or difficult feelings, you weaken the hold that the craving has over you.

HABITS OF DISTRACTION

If you become aware that your attention has moved into an unhealthy habit of distraction, such as spacing out watching TV or surfing the Internet—or if you catch yourself before moving into it—bring close attention to your bodily experience and emotions. Stay with these sensations and feelings, then bring to mind the question: What would I have to experience if I didn't turn toward my habitual behavior? You may locate a feeling of tightness or numbness, perhaps, or a restless feeling. Meet the experience with a kind, curious, and accepting attention. See how, when met in this way, the feeling will come and go in its own time.

HABITS OF RESISTING

Habits of resisting, which manifest as frustration, annoyance, impatience, anger, judgment, and similar emotions and mind states, tend to have a different feeling tone. We feel as if we're defending ourselves, resisting a threat, or protecting ourselves from something that will harm us. Often we'll feel tightness, tension, contraction, agitation, heat, or other "fight-or-flight" sensations. The accompanying thoughts or beliefs in our mind may urge us to act in a way that will change this unpleasant situation or experience.

If something triggers the urge to move toward an object you crave, you can open to the sensations, feelings, and emotions that arise—choosing to stay with what's alive in the body and the emotions without acting on it.

We can meet the habits of resistance by bringing our attention back to "what am I experiencing right now?" then meet what is here with a kind, curious, and accepting awareness. Bringing awareness to your breath helps to ease feelings of tightness and tension. Putting your hand on your heart can help temper thoughts of "I need to do something." Sending a wish of peace and well-being to yourself, perhaps whispering "may I be peaceful," can create a sense of inner space within which the difficult experience and sensations can be held. Here, too, the practice is to bring a kind, curious, and accepting attitude to what is present—choosing to stay with your direct experience rather than moving into habitual behavior.

HABITS OF BUSYNESS

Finally, we can respond to *habits of doing*—the feeling that we're always on our way somewhere, feeling that something bad will happen if we don't keep moving and getting things done—with the same attitude of kind, interested, and accepting awareness. We begin by coming back to what we are feeling now, physically, emotionally, mentally. We think, "things might be OK if I can just accomplish the next task." We can feel frenetic, agitated, intense, or stressed out. Mindfulness invites us to experience all the sensations and emotions associated with that energy without identifying with it. Mindfulness practice helps prevent us from getting swept up in the story of "I need to get this done or things will fall apart."

These four kinds of habits are not mutually exclusive. When we feel a craving for something that we think will make us feel good, such as eating something sweet, we are often, at the same time, wanting to avoid an unpleasant feeling—for example, tension, worry, tightness, or numbness. Similarly, when we disconnect from the present and spend large amounts of time online, there is often a feeling of discomfort, anxiety, or tension



that we're subconsciously seeking to escape. With each of these habitual patterns, the remedy is the same: to return to our present-moment experience and meet it with interest, friendliness, and acceptance.

Untangling ourselves from habitual thoughts and beliefs

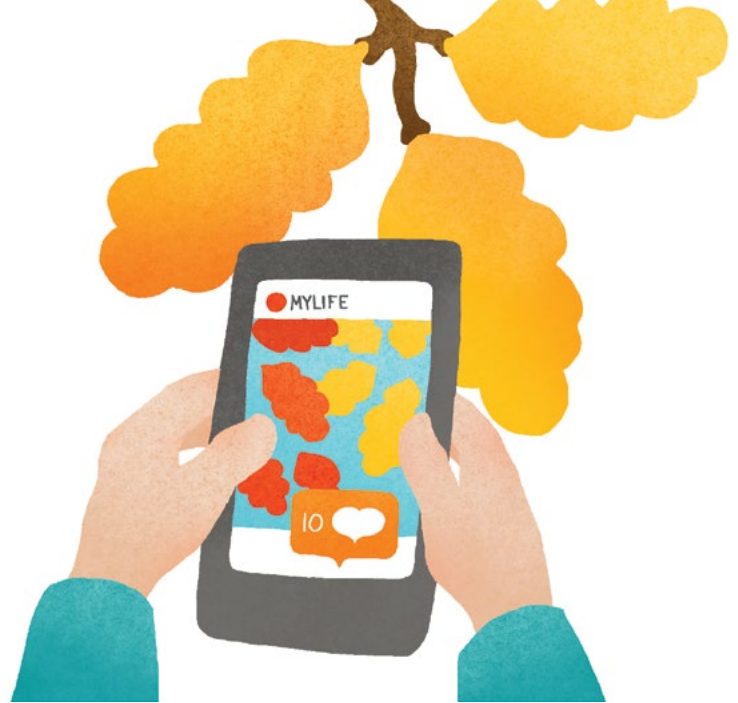
Much of the stress, anxiety, and suffering in our lives comes from not bringing wise attention to our thoughts and beliefs, and treating them as "true." We get swept up by the stories we tell ourselves. Our habit patterns play an important role in perpetuating thoughts and beliefs that lead to suffering. You might experience a loss or feel lonely or anxious and comfort yourself by eating something sweet, having a glass of wine, or zoning out in front of the TV for a few hours. That's fine, but if you obsessively repeat the mindless behavior in response to the same difficult emotion, a habit of responding in this way develops. Your mind associates the temporary release from unpleasant feelings with the new behavior and your thinking reinforces the behavior. *I feel better when I have a couple of beers. I'll feel sad/lonely if I don't have a cigarette.*

Habits of *resisting* or *aversion*—yelling at one's spouse or kids, responding to experience with frustration, anger, impatience, harsh judgment of ourselves or others—tend to have the underlying thought pattern, *this needs to be different for me to feel OK. Or if I don't change this, something really bad will happen.*

With habits of *distraction*—such as constantly checking our phone or spending excessive time watching TV—the underlying thinking is typically that our present experience is boring or unpleasant, and that doing something familiar will be more interesting or enjoyable.

Habits of *doing*—when we're leaning in to the next thing we need to get done with a tense

If you notice your attention caught by an unhealthy distraction—such as spacing out on the web—ask yourself, “What would I have to experience if I didn't turn toward this habit?”



energy—tend to have the underlying thought pattern that *something bad will happen if I don't keep moving.*

Mindfulness provides skills and practices to loosen our identification with thoughts, helping us see that the content of a thought is not inherently "true." With attention, thoughts can be observed and met with wisdom rather than being acted out in habitual ways. For example, when a familiar stimulus triggers the thought, *some ice cream would be nice now*, we can observe this as "wanting" or "wanting thought," rather than automatically going to the freezer and scooping out a bowl of ice cream.

We can deepen our awareness of the emotions and bodily feelings that often underlie and spur our habits of thought and action. And where our thoughts have hardened into beliefs that perpetuate unhealthy habits, we can investigate these beliefs and untangle ourselves from them.

Observing thoughts, letting them come and go

One of the most powerful realizations that we can come to in mindfulness practice is to see that we can bring awareness to thoughts and beliefs rather than being lost in them or ruled by them. There is all the difference in the world between, on the one hand, *bringing awareness* to feeling angry at something a colleague said—feeling the tension and heat in our face and chest, paying attention to our feelings of annoyance or the thoughts of what we might say—and,

on the other hand, *being swept up* in the anger and the narrative in our mind of how wrong they are, or what we'll say to them.

When we bring awareness to our thoughts, choices open up for us—including the choice not to believe or identify with our thoughts. When we fail to bring awareness to our thoughts, however, we have little choice but to act out old thought patterns and follow them.

So, an essential mindfulness skill is to develop a healthy relationship with our thoughts—seeing thoughts as ephemeral products of the mind rather than *the truth*. When we practice mindfulness of breathing, or other objects of awareness, we may get caught up in planning, worrying, daydreaming, or remembering something from the past. When we become aware that our attention has shifted, we pause and invite our attention back to our breath in a kind, gentle, and non-judging way. It can be helpful to make a mental note, “thinking,” “planning,” “daydreaming,” or “worried thought.” The practice of naming or noting “thinking” can help us observe thoughts as passing phenomena, rather than getting lost in the content of the thoughts.

An attitude of kindness and non-judgment helps us develop a healthy relationship with our thoughts; there is no need to try to empty the mind. If thoughts can be experienced without resistance, clinging, or judgment, they cease to be a problem. If they're experienced as “problematic” in any way, this is an indication that our relationship with them calls for wise attention.

Bringing awareness to thoughts as thoughts and choosing to come back to the present by letting go of the narrative helps us loosen our identification with the thoughts and beliefs that can keep us locked in unhealthy habits.

Untangling thoughts from feelings and emotions

The practice of bringing awareness to our present-moment experience and returning attention to our primary focus when we become aware that we have drifted into thought is an essential mindfulness skill.

At times, though, our thoughts are part of a constellation of sensations, emotions, and urges that can perpetuate unhealthy habits if we don't bring awareness to them as well. For example, a memory might bring on a feeling of sadness with heavy bodily sensations around the heart and the eyes, and these feelings might trigger an urge to

space out by going online—particularly if this is an established experience. We might find ourselves going from site to site on the Internet without any clear purpose or any awareness that we have consciously made a choice to “check out.”

Without awareness we often act in habitual ways that don't serve us. But if we allow ourselves to experience them, we can untangle the complex web of sensations, emotions, and urges that accompany our thoughts and choose to act in ways that serve our deeper happiness and well-being.

If you are using the breath as your meditation object or “anchor,” you can simply return your attention to your breathing when you become aware that you've been lost in thought. However, if you find that you keep being pulled back to a recurrent thought—for example, a painful memory or a fearful or anxious thought that has a strong charge to it—then, rather than simply bringing attention to the breath, bring awareness to whatever sensations or emotions are present in the body. If there's tightness in the chest or belly, open fully to the sensations. Breathe into them and let them come and go in their own time, meeting them with kindness and acceptance. Open to whatever emotions are present—anger, for example, by making a note of “anger,” if it's helpful. If worried, sad, or fearful thoughts arise, simply bring awareness to them, noting “thinking,” or “sad thought.”



Let each part of your experience be known in its own field—thoughts simply observed as thoughts, emotions as emotions, sensations as sensations, allowing each experience to come and go in its own time, riding the waves of the experience. In this way, we untangle the otherwise unexamined constellation of emotions, sensations, thoughts, and urges that can fuel unhealthy habit patterns.

Investigating beliefs and narratives

It is natural that when we think and act in particular ways, over time we can come to believe that we don't have any choice in relation to these thoughts or actions. We may even believe, "this is who I am."

If we've developed a habit of responding angrily to small annoyances or slights, we can easily believe, "I'm an angry person" or "people are stupid."

If we've smoked cigarettes for many years, we may believe, "I'm a smoker" or "I don't have the willpower to quit"—and these beliefs can help perpetuate the unhealthy behavior.

If we aimlessly surf the web for the first hour of work, we may believe, "I'll never be productive at work," and that we can't be mindful when we sit down at our desk in the morning.

If we're in a constant state of stress, rushing to get everything done, we might believe, "I'm never going to be able to keep up." And the belief helps fuel the stressful state.

Over time, the repetition of unhealthy habits of thought and action can solidify beliefs that identify us with the habits and limit the possibility of changing these patterns.

It's important to investigate these beliefs and to see the ways in which we're identifying with



them. Seeing that these narratives are a creation of our minds can allow us to untangle ourselves from them so that they cease to fuel unhealthy habit patterns.

We can begin by asking, *Is this really true?* Is it true that "I'm an angry person" or "I don't have the willpower to quit" or "I'll never be able to get all these things done"?

Or is this a belief or story that I've developed and become identified with over time that, in fact, is not solid, is not "me," and can be let go of?

We can counter negative beliefs and narratives, which often are accompanied by *never* or *always*—with examples that call our story into question. For instance, if the underlying belief is, *I'm indecisive and unfocused*, you might think about a Saturday morning when you were up early and focused for a long hike in the mountains.

You can engage in an inquiry into the beliefs that help perpetuate unhealthy habits. You can take some time in your meditation period to sit with these questions: What am I believing? Is this really true? How is it to live with this belief? How would it be to live without this belief? Who would I be without this belief?

Working with your thoughts through these practices of mindfulness and inquiry helps weaken any long-standing beliefs that fuel and perpetuate unhealthy habits, enabling you to live more freely. ●

As with other habits, we can meet the habits of resisting by bringing our attention back to the question "what am I experiencing right now?" Then, we meet what is here with a kind, curious, and accepting awareness.

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