

~ THE POWER OF ~
MINDFULNESS



The Power of Mindfulness

Change the Way You Think and Get What You Want From Life

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Introduction

If there is one ability that you could learn that would make every single aspect of your life better, what would it be?

Undoubtedly, it would be the ability to control your emotions and to control the way you think.

This might sound like a surprising claim but the ability to control your emotions and the way you respond to a situation is not only the secret to happiness, but also the secret to being able to get whatever you want from life.

Why? Because it's our interpretation of events, more than the events themselves, that dictate our happiness, mood and performance. Not only that, but our emotions and the neurotransmitters that control them are what alter our ability to focus, to remember information and to be creative.

Let's imagine a scenario where you're trapped inside a lorry that has turned over and is now hanging over the edge of a precipice. The slightest movement could ruin the balance and send you plunging to your death... bad times!

What happens to you in this situation? You freeze in place of course but at the same time, your body becomes *very* active. Your brain knows you're in danger, and thus it causes certain neurons in the brain to fire and release neurotransmitters. These neurotransmitters include the likes of dopamine, cortisol and norepinephrine.

Meanwhile, the sympathetic nervous system responds to these cues and begins producing more chemicals of its own. Specifically, a part called the adrenal medulla will secrete adrenaline and noradrenaline and this will result in numerous physiological changes in your body: your heartrate increases, your muscles contract and your mind races.

But here's the twist: it turns out that a rescue crew has been working unbeknownst to you and has attached the lorry to the ground by a chain. You're completely safe.

The reaction of your body is in response to your belief and your perception then – *not* the reality.

And as we will see in this book, there are many scenarios where we believe we're in more danger than we really are resulting in the stress response. And as we'll *also* see, that stress response is capable of causing all kinds of psychological and health problems.

If you could gain control of your emotional response then, you could prevent that stressful response and instead stay calm and focussed.

But the power of controlling your emotions is much more profound than that. As we'll see later in this book, the ability to increase your confidence can actually lead to all kinds of changes in your life that result in you being more productive, more successful... even wealthier.

And it doesn't stop there! Controlling your emotions also means you'll be able to overcome stressful situations and even phobias! Say goodbye to a fear of public speaking... And likewise, controlling your emotions can help you to avoid arguments and shouting matches in your relationship – which will result in a more harmonious and happy home life.

Then there are the ways that your emotion can make you more powerful and more efficient. Did you know for instance, that you can increase muscle fiber recruitment and potentially tap into superhuman strength by getting into the right mood? Did you know that the correct combination of neurochemistry can give you perfect recall?

This book is going to show you how to tap into all those things and at the same time, it will show you how you can simply get some peace and quiet by calming your mind and taking a time out. Read on and get ready to change your life...



CHAPTER 1 – WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Chapter 1: What is Mindfulness?

I could arrange this book in such a way that you have to build up to mindfulness. I could talk about how bad for you stress is, or I could talk about neuroscience.

But I'll get to that later. What you probably want to know right off the bat is just what mindfulness is. Where did it come from? And how can you use it just to get a little more calm and relaxation in your life?

We'll look at that first and from there, we'll delve into how you can utilize some more technical neuroscience in order to tap into the more profound capabilities of your brain...

So what exactly is mindfulness?

Essentially, mindfulness is a form of meditation that has been adopted by CBT. CBT in turn is 'cognitive behavioral therapy'; a psychotherapeutic approach that can be used to treat all manner of psychological conditions like anxiety, phobias, addiction etc.

Mindfulness essentially gives us a tool that we can use to not only calm our thoughts and escape the stressors of the day but *also* reflect on the contents of our mind in the interests of self-improvement.

Meditation generally has something of a 'bad' reputation. That is to say that a lot of people associate it with religion or esoteric ideas and they think that they can't meditate unless they're

'spiritual'. This can be off-putting for someone who doesn't hold any religious beliefs or who doesn't like esoteric ideas in general.

But in fact you can practice meditation whether you are religious or an atheist. All meditation really is, is a directed attempt to control your thoughts and the content of your mind and thereby to gain some peace and quiet or at least to be able to better understand the contents of your own brain.

Often this means completely silencing all thoughts. Many types of meditation, such as transcendental meditation, instruct you to think of 'absolutely nothing' and often this is achieved by focussing on your breathing, a mantra or a physical object like a candle flame. This can be difficult for beginners though, as they constantly find their mind wandering.

The idea behind mindfulness meditation then is not to try and empty your thoughts but instead to simply step back from them and 'observe' them like a detached third party. This way, you aren't letting your thoughts affect you and make you stressed but you also aren't going to struggle with not being 'allowed' to think anything.

Meanwhile, using this technique will also allow you to become more aware of your own thoughts and thereby able to edit any thoughts that are leading you into trouble. For instance, if you constantly find yourself thinking about the ways that you could hurt yourself, you might notice that this is a bad habit and then attempt to fix that.

This may be the long term aim of mindfulness when used in CBT. In the short term though, we are simply to use it in order to remove ourselves from our thoughts and emotions so that we can get some calm and thereby recover ready to tackle the day ahead.

Mindfulness in Daily Life

This is what mindfulness refers to in most cases but it has also been appropriated to mean a lot more. If mindfulness means being more aware of your thoughts, then it can also be applied outside of meditation and to the way you go about your day. In this case, mindfulness simply means being mindful of what you're focussing on and what you're thinking at any given point. This is useful because very often you'll find that your mind isn't perhaps where it should be.

For example, if you are walking through a beautiful scenic woodland but you are thinking about work, then as far as your body is concerned you may as well *be* at work. In this case, mindfulness can be used simply to make yourself more aware of where you are and to actually focus on what's around you. That means feeling the breeze on your skin, looking at the beautiful flowers and smelling the fresh air. When you do all that, you will benefit much more from the experience.

Likewise, you can use mindfulness to direct your attention to all manner of other things. For example your physical sensations. Often we aren't aware of just how we're sitting, how we're standing or how we're feeling.

Take a moment right now to reflect on this. How comfortable are you at the moment? Does any part of your body hurt? If you're sitting down, then where is most pressure on you? Can you feel your clothes against your body? A watch maybe? How warm are you? Are you leaning more to one side?

This kind of mindfulness can be useful if you want to try and fix your posture but also if you want to improve your abilities in sports or just move more efficiently.

Being more mindful of the way you speak can meanwhile help you to speak more eloquently, to stop using derogatory words, to stop swearing, or to change the whole way that people perceive you. For example, if you want to sound more intelligent, then you can simply try using bigger words or speaking a little more slowly.

You can also use mindfulness to be happier in every day life. Simply try to stop letting negative emotions affect you by identifying them as temporary and destructive. You can simply 'notice' that you're getting angry and acknowledge that your thoughts will be tainted by that. With practice, this can make you a much calmer and much happier person.

But what do you find when you try and do this?

In all likelihood, you'll find that you forget. This is just the same way that you forget to pick up bread when your other half asks you to. And it's just the same way you forget to pick up your keys on the way out of the house.

The point is: most of the time we have no control over what we're focussed on or what we're paying attention to. And as such, we find ourselves forgetting things, getting into bad habits or stressing when we should be enjoying ourselves.

Practicing mindfulness both as a form of meditation *and* during the day can therefore help you to improve your ability to control your thoughts and thereby to decide how you want to improve yourself and what you want to focus on.



CHAPTER 2 – HOW TO START USING MINDFULNESS

Chapter 2: How to Start Using Mindfulness

So that's mindfulness in a nutshell, the next question is how you start using it.

One option is to use online 'guided meditations'. These are simply recordings that instruct you on what to do as you try meditating. For example, they might tell you to close your eyes and breathe in and out through the nose, then they might tell you to think about your body. One particularly good tool that does this is the Headspace App which can be downloaded for Android or iOS but which is also available to use through the web. This will talk you through numerous guided meditations but only the first 10 are free. Still, you can learn enough from those 10 sessions in order to then thrive without the app.

Generally though, most mindfulness meditations will take a very similar procedure and you can go through the steps then without necessarily needing to be talked through it. And in fact, if you *can* do your meditation without guidance, then you should find that you're actually more effective at it because you won't be continuously interrupted by someone's voice.

Let's go over what the steps will *generally* be for a mindfulness meditation session...

Step 1: Breathing

The first thing to do is to start breathing. You can do this using something called 'equal breathing' from yoga. Here, you breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. As you do, you hold each inhalation and exhalation for 3 seconds (hence the 'equal' bit). These

long draws in and long exhalations will allow you to completely fill the lungs with fresh oxygen and expel all the CO₂.

But to be honest, you can use any kind of breathing so long as it is slow, deliberate and full. The guidance they give on the Headspace App for instance is simply to 'breathe loud enough so that the person next to you would be able to hear'.

Why the breathing? Essentially, breathing slowly is the best way to indicate to the body that the coast is clear and you're safe. We breathe quickly when we're stressed to get more oxygen around our bodies and we can breathe more slowly when we are relaxed. Thus, breathing deeply and slowly will help us to exit the 'fight or flight' state and to instead enter the 'rest and digest' state. This should fix our heartrate variance, reduce cortisol and get us ready to enter a relaxed state.

Step 2: Senses

Next, you are often told to focus on your physical senses. This means noticing the smells, sounds and even the temperature around the room. Your eyes will normally be closed, so sight is rule out of this one.

The objective here is not to 'look' for sounds or strain to hear them. Instead, just notice the sounds that you don't normally. You might find that you can hear creaking in the house, maybe you can hear the neighbors, maybe you can hear the rain outside or the wind. There are probably far off birds and/or traffic.

This is always a fantastic example of just how little we normally pay attention to and how much richer our experience becomes when we practice mindfulness. It's also a great way to get into that habit and to start relaxing the body even more.

Step 3: Body Scan

Body scan meditation is sometimes described as being its own thing but it can be used as part of any meditation session. The idea here is simply to become more aware of your own body as we described earlier but to do this by systematically starting at the top of the head and then moving gradually through to the toes, noticing how you feel at each stage.

If you want to use this process to get to sleep, then it can be a great tool for that purpose too. The best way to do this though is to try completely relaxing the muscles by first tensing and then releasing each part of your body as you move through it. What you'll find is that you carry large amounts of tension everywhere from your face muscles, to your neck, to your arms and legs. Once you recognize this and let it go, you'll feel far more relaxed and eventually this can enable you to fall into a deep and restful sleep.

For now though, we're just scanning the body and using this as a way to become more mindful of ourselves and to begin the process of introspection and self-directed attention.

Step 4: Focus on Breathing

After noticing each part of the body, return to the chest and pay particular attention to the way it rises and falls. As you do this, you can also take this opportunity to fix your breathing.

Chances are, that when you first notice your own breathing, you'll find that you are breathing in so that your chest expands first. But in fact, it should be your abdomen that moves first and this should then be *followed* by your chest. Correct breathing (called abdominal breathing) should start by allowing the stomach to relax and protrude and then filling the lungs.

This is effective because the process opens up space in your abdominal cavity. This then allows the lungs to expand *into* that space, which is then followed by them expanding upwards through your chest as well.

This type of breathing allows you to take in more oxygen and to thus trigger even more relaxation hormones. Most of us don't use this kind of breathing though because we have hunched postures which fold our stomach and prevent us from being able to breathe from there. The result is that we end up breathing with much shallower and faster breaths, which actually increases stress and cortisol.

But don't worry about that if you don't want to. For now, just notice your own breath and take this opportunity to count your breaths as they come in and out. This is the part that is going to work a little like transcendental meditation by quietening down a lot of the activity throughout the brain.

Step 5: Let Your Mind Wander

Once you've done this for a little while and you're feeling particularly still, it's time to just let go of your mind and let it do whatever it wants. Now your aim is not to try and control or silence your thoughts. Instead, you simply let your mind wander naturally – or stay completely still if it wants to.

The description that is often used is that you're 'watching thoughts go by like clouds'. Headspace describes your thoughts in these cases as being more like cars in the road. It emphasizes the importance of watching the 'cars' go past but not running out into the road to chase the traffic. This is all about detached observation.

After you have done this for a while, you can simply allow your mind to gradually return to normal and gently open your eyes.

Tips for Rapid Improvement

A lot of people try to start meditating but they end up failing. Why is this?

One problem is that too many of us want to get immediate results and expect to feel instantly different. When this doesn't happen, we end up frustrated and stressed. This is the worst attitude you can possibly take to mindfulness meditation. The whole *point* is that you are to let your mind do whatever it wants. As soon as you start forcing it in one direction or another, you will lose that all-important freedom and start producing stress hormones.

Likewise, try not to get too upset with yourself if you try this and your mind keeps wandering or you keep getting distracted. If you get itchy, it's fine to scratch your face. If you need a glass of water, get up and get one. Don't try and force anything, just let yourself 'be' as you are.

If you really want help jump-starting your progress though, then you should consider 'priming' yourself. Priming is a term used in psychology that simply refers to preparing the brain in a certain way. Sometimes that means influencing the answers we give to questions by showing certain stimulus. But in other cases, it means changing our emotions. In this case, it pays to do something calming but that nevertheless requires focus just before you try meditating. So for

example, you might try relaxing in a beautiful but novel location. Novel scenery increase neurotransmitters and hormones associated with focus, while being in natural environments has been shown to make us more relaxed and to encourage slower brainwaves.

Finally, don't be too ambitious in regards to how often you intend to meditate. Another classic mistake is to set out with the idea that you're going to meditate for 30 minutes every day. This is destined for failure *unless* you currently spend 30 minutes of every day bored out of your mind. Start with something small – even just 5 minutes before you wake up – and then you can build on this habit.



CHAPTER 3 – INTRODUCING COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

Chapter 3: Introducing Cognitive Restructuring

Mindfulness and cognitive restructuring go together like chutney and cheese. In CBT, mindfulness is usually used in conjunction with cognitive restructuring to the point that they are inseparable.

Using mindfulness meditation and mindfulness in waking life is going to help you learn to step back from your emotions and over time, you'll find that you become calmer, more focussed and happier.

But it can be used for so much more once you recognize the power this tool has for bringing about change. The point is that once you identify negative thoughts that are negatively affecting your life, you can now change them. And that's where cognitive restructuring comes in.

But first a little more on CBT.

A Brief Primer on CBT

CBT is today the most popular option for treating mental illness among most major health organizations. The approach was introduced relatively recently and is a natural extension of another school of psychology that rained previously (around the 50s).

That school was 'behaviorism' and was entirely defined by the notion of conditioning and association. The idea was that if you experienced two stimulus at the same time often enough, they would eventually become linked in your mind. Today we know this to be true: in neuroplasticity 'neurons that fire together, wire together'. This means that if two neurons fire at the same time often enough, they eventually grow a very strong connection which might cause the other to fire involuntarily.

This was demonstrated famously by Ivan Pavlov who experimented on dogs. He rang a bell whenever he fed the canine participants and over time, this created an association via 'positive reinforcement'. Ultimately, this led to the dogs salivating whenever the bell was rung. As far as their brains were concerned, bell = food.

This same idea was then applied to human psychology. The hypothesis was that we could learn phobias, for example, by associating negative experiences with harmless objects. Likewise, it was theorized that you could *treat* a phobia via 'reassociation'. If you classically condition someone to associate that stimulus with positive things again, they eventually lose the phobia. And this method proved successful in various studies.

Behaviorism when a little *too* far though, in that it claimed that every aspect of human experience was learned this way. We learned how to gesture because when we reached for things as babies, people passed them to us. We learned to walk because we kept falling over when we did it wrong. Etc. Everything we did then was believed to be entirely motivated by the reward centers of our brain, which in turn helped us form new associations and develop new behaviors. The things we didn't learn ourselves directly, we might learn 'vicariously' through social conditioning – watching others for example.

For years this idea reigned supreme but eventually it started to lose favour as it was unable to explain every aspect of our psychology. Ultimately, it became apparent that there must be an additional 'internal' element and this is where the 'cognitive' bit comes in. Cognitive behavioural therapy then takes behavioralism and applies the idea that you can *also* reinforce experiences, both positive and negative, by thinking about them.

For instance, you can learn to be afraid of heights even if you've never fallen from a height. How? By constantly thinking about how bad it might be to fall from a height. In other words, if you keep imagining that falling must be dangerous and if you tell yourself things like 'those railings don't look safe', then you can cause yourself to be afraid.

What's more, is that each time you think something like this and then stay away from the height as a result, you are essentially reinforcing that belief just as though you had fallen.

So the idea behind CBT is to use the principles of behaviorism but to combine these with the cognitive aspect. That means not only using elements like 'reassociation' but also 'thinking' cures.

Techniques Used in CBT

So one example of this is to use mindfulness meditation. Simply by choosing not to let your thoughts and emotions affect you, you can become less controlled by them and thereby less susceptible to your own fears and ruminations.

But there are many more aspects to this too and these tend to fall under the heading of 'cognitive restructuring' or in other words – changing your thoughts.

One example is something called 'thought challenging'. Here, you simply breakdown one of your thoughts or beliefs and thereby assess just how accurate it is. For instance, you might find that you are afraid of talking public because you think people will laugh at you if you stutter. This is a debilitating belief that is ironically making you much *more* likely to stutter.

So what you need to do in order to overcome this is to look at the thought and ask: is it realistic? What you'll find 90% of the time is that this belief is unlikely and unfounded. Most people would not be harsh enough to laugh at you if you stuttered and even if they did, it wouldn't matter because you wouldn't see them again. Perhaps you might feel 'lame' or 'like a loser' if you stutter and people laugh. Again, you should assess that: being able to confidently talk however it comes out and not care about the outcome is actually a sign that you're very confident and aloof!

I actually used this technique myself when I had a phobia. I used to have a rather embarrassing phobia of peeing in public urinals. My fear was that if I couldn't go, then people would look at me and think I was strange for hanging out there and 'not really weeing'.

Then I realized that most of the time I was in that situation, I was in the pub. In other words? Most of the other people in the toilets were probably drunk and oblivious to what I was doing! Meanwhile... why did it matter what they thought anyway? Let them think that! Eventually, this helped me to completely overcome the phobia and now I have no problem at all with it.

Another example is one that marries the ideas from CBT with more traditional notions from behaviorism. This one is called 'hypothesis testing'. Essentially, it means that you're testing your theory to work out whether or not it really holds up.

So if you're afraid people will laugh if you stutter during public speaking, that means you need to purposefully stutter on stage and let everyone see it. This will then in turn show you what happens in that scenario – and what you'll likely discover is that *nothing* happens. People are kind and they'll just wait for you to finish and start again.

Again, I used this in the real world. Except I actually had no say in it this time...

I was learning to drive here in the UK (where we use stick) and I kept stalling whenever the lights turned green and I was at the front. Of course this happened due to nerves: I was worried that if I didn't leave quicker off the mark, then the traffic behind me would get angry and it would be terribly embarrassing.

So my driving instructor, being something of a renegade, decided to slam on my handbrake and tell me that we were going to sit there for the *entire* time that the light was green. Traffic behind me honked their horns, people shouted... but nothing happened.

And then I started just fine the next time it turned green. And I started just fine every time since!



CHAPTER 4 – HOW TO USE COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING IN THE REAL WORLD

Chapter 4: How to Use Cognitive Restructuring in the Real World

So now you know how to use mindfulness and you know how to use cognitive restructuring. Hopefully you've also been able to guess how the two might be linked: we use mindfulness in order to identify the negative thoughts and then we apply cognitive restructuring in order to change them.

This has been used for a while now in order to treat things like phobias, anxiety disorders, addictions and much more.

But what if you don't have any of those problems and you're completely 'fine'? Well in that case... we can still use cognitive restructuring. Because the thing is, you can actually use cognitive restructuring to improve aspects of your thought process that aren't 'broken'. In other words, this isn't just a tool for healing but also a tool for self-improvement. And there are countless ways you can use it to make yourself calmer, more confident and more productive.

Likewise, there are many things that are similar to cognitive restructuring but don't technically fall under the same heading.

We'll be returning to this concept more in future but for now, let's look at some alternative ways to control your thought patterns and some alternative motivations for doing it.

Fear Setting

Often we think of fear and anxiety as being short term responses to situations or stimuli. But in fact, our fear and anxiety can be much longer term and affect our decision making, goal setting and decisions.

Tim Ferriss proposes a concept called 'fear setting' in his book *The Four Hour Workweek* as a tool you can use to overcome your fears and thereby start getting what you want out of life. Let's say you're thinking of starting a new job, taking a career break so you can go travelling, or starting your own business. You've been thinking of doing these things for a long while but the problem is that you're too afraid to do it because you think you'll that you'll end up without a job or without a partner. Surely if you leave your current job to go travelling, you won't be able to get a job on your return? And the longer you're unemployed, the more unemployable you'll become. Eventually your partner will become sick and tired of scraping by because of a stupid decision you made and they'll leave you. Then your house will be repossessed. And then you'll end up homeless and alone.

That might all sound very over-the-top but this is the kind of thing we actually think on an unconscious level all the time. And the *reason* we think it is that humans are naturally very risk averse. We evolved in the wild where 'risk' would generally mean 'lions'. As such, we learned to become more sensitive to risk and to defend our assets more than we go after new assets.

But today risk is very rarely anything life threatening. More likely, risk will mean 'getting shouted at' but we blow it out of proportion because we're risk averse people.

By now, you should hopefully be able to guess what's coming next: thought challenging. We're going to take these beliefs and fears and challenge them by looking at just how realistic they are.

And Tim Ferriss' technique is perfect for this.

So first, think about what it is you want to do and why you want to do it. Now think about all the things that are right now holding you back from taking the plunge and giving it a go. If we're talking about taking a career break, then your list of fears and reasons might look like so:

- Now's not a good time, you don't have much money
- You don't want to leave your partner for that long
- You're afraid your job won't be there when you get back
- You're afraid you won't be able to find subsequent employment
- You're afraid that you might ultimately end up destitute, in debt or homeless

Now let's assess each of these beliefs. To do that, we're looking not only at how likely they are but also how you'd cope if it were to happen. Think of contingencies and things you can do to prevent them from being likely.

- Now's not a good time, you don't have much money
 - There's never actually a good time – and if you travel smart you don't need much money
 - You can work online while you travel
 - You actually won't need that much money
 - Now is probably better than later
- You don't want to leave your partner for that long
 - They probably don't mind
 - If it's important to you, then it's something you have to do
 - It's preferable to feeling resentful toward your partner because they prevented you from seeing the world
- You're afraid your job won't be there when you get back
 - It probably will be – discuss with your employer
 - Do you love your job that much?
- You're afraid you won't be able to find subsequent employment
 - This is highly unlikely – if you're skilled then travel will simply add to your CV
 - You could even find a new job and agree to start later on

- If necessary, then you can take a part time job or start a side business to tide yourself over
- You're afraid that you might ultimately end up destitute, in debt or homeless
 - You can live on savings a long time
 - You can earn money in other ways
 - You probably have parents or friends who would take you in long before you went homeless

Now think about the alternative: do you want to *never* go travelling? Do you want to spend every single day stuck in that office without ever accomplishing the things you want to accomplish? Let this motivate you more than the fear and now make the decision to take the plunge.

The same technique can help you to make the decision to start a new career, to move country, or to do all the countless other things that you've been dreaming of doing.

Remove the Fear and Date Anyone

So in this case we've used thought challenging again to break down our fears so that we can go after whatever we want in life.

But another method you can use is to acknowledge those fears as real but just find a strategy that minimizes the risk. In this section, we'll look at a technique you can use this to do in dating that will give you the confidence to approach and date everyone.

So let's say that you're the average awkward guy, for argument's sake. You go to bars regularly with friends hoping to 'pull' but you're too afraid to approach the people on the dance floor. Why? Because you're worried they'll reject you and you'll thus end up feeling incredibly awkward. That's a genuine concern (although we could ask why it matters) so it's hard to deny it out of hand.

The simple solution? Minimize the risk and remove your likelihood of failing.

To do this, you can simply assess the situation before you approach anyone. So hang back away from the bar and chat with friends. As you do, just look around the place for people you're interested in and if you see someone, smile and them while making eye contact. If they're interested, then you can bet they're going to smile back. If they're absolutely *not* interested? They'll probably just look away and you'll know about it. But in either situation, you haven't lost face and you can still hold your head high. There's nothing to be afraid of.

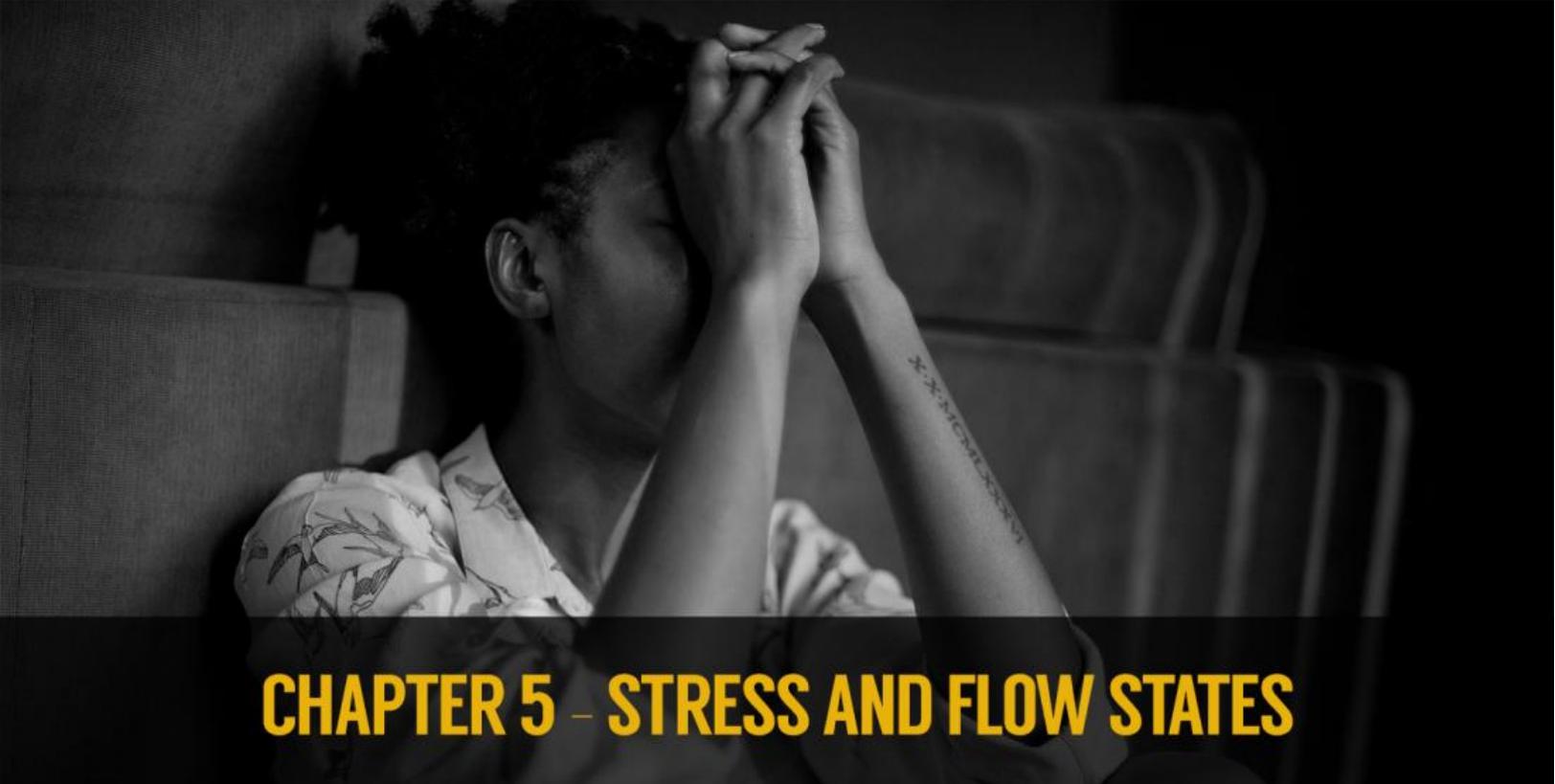
If they've smiled though, then you can probably relatively safely approach them. That doesn't mean they're necessarily into you but it means they at least are open to the idea of chatting with you. So the next step is to head over in your group of friends to talk to their group of friends. Don't speak to them only; speak to the whole group so you simply come across as someone friendly, outgoing and interesting. Likewise, let your friends mingle with their friends too. When you get a moment, try to spend a bit more time chatting with the person you were initially interested in and who gave you the go-ahead to come over.

If conversation is going well with the person you're interested in, then you can step it up one more notch by simply offering to buy them a drink. This is a very clear signal that you're interested in them and so they probably won't say yes unless they're interested back. Now they're away, you can talk to them on their own and assess the situation.

Finally, ask if they want to dance. And if they say yes, take the same approach: dance more and more closely until eventually you're completely sure it's okay to make the move.

In this situation, you have now approached someone attractive in a bar but at no point is there any danger of rejection. If they don't want to talk to you, they won't smile. If they aren't interested when you come over, they'll make excuses and you can talk to their friends. If they change their minds, they can say no to the drink. If you're giving off the wrong signals, then they can say no to the dance. But at no point have you embarrassed yourself and you haven't done anything that you can't 'bounce back' from.

Think about other things that you're afraid to do in your life, assess why it is you're afraid, and then think of ways you can get around that fear by avoiding the worst case scenarios!



CHAPTER 5 – STRESS AND FLOW STATES

Chapter 5: Stress and Flow States

We're only halfway through the book and already you should have picked up some pretty useful skills. You now know how to enter a mindful state at any given time to better appreciate your surroundings or at least just to escape stress for a few moments of respite.

But let's rewind and look at that stress in a little more detail. What is it about stress that makes it so serious? Why are we trying to combat stress? And is stress *always* bad?

Actually, stress is something that is sorely misunderstood by a lot of people. Stress is not really 'one thing', rather it is a spectrum of responses that occur in response to dangerous situations. Essentially, when you detect danger, your body response by releasing hormones and neurotransmitters that trigger the 'fight or flight' response. This is the response that we described earlier and it is modulated by the following hormones/neurotransmitters (neurotransmitters are like hormones but they affect the brain more directly and don't last as long):

- Dopamine
- Epinephrine

- Norepinephrine
- Serotonin
- Cortisol
- Glutamate
- Testosterone
- Oestrogen

These then together cause a number of symptoms that you should be familiar with if ever you've gotten into an argument, fight or dangerous predicament. And if you haven't... who are you??

These symptoms include:

- Sense of dread
- Racing thoughts
- Shaking
- Muscle contractions
- Vasodilation (widening of the veins)
- Increased heartrate
- Pupil dilation
- Resistance to pain
- Suppression of the immune system and digestive system so that more blood and resources can be sent to the brain and muscles
- Increased sensitivity to sounds and light
- Tunnel vision
- Rapid breathing
- Sweating
- Increased blood viscosity to encourage the blood to clot in case of an injury

In short, our body goes into a 'high performance mode' by diverting energy and supplies away from maintenance tasks and less immediately urgent processes. Our strength, speed and ability to fight or climb increase and this makes us more powerful and better able to respond.

This response evolved in the wild in order to help us protect ourselves in case of danger. If we saw a predator, or if we saw a forest fire, then these changes would help us escape. Likewise, we would become better fighters when competing with members of our own species for resources.

And sometimes in the modern world, this response can be exactly what we need. If a mugger pulls a knife on you, then this will give you the best chance of running away to live another day.

Chronic Stress

But the problem comes when the threat isn't a physical threat and when it isn't an 'immediate' threat. We simply live in a world that we didn't evolve for and this means that many of our systems are essentially outdated.

For example, if you're giving a speech, then your body will react in just the same way as it would if you saw a forest fire. And in this case, none of the changes would help at all. You'd be more likely to stutter, you'd look sweaty and your voice might even change.

And if you panic (sometimes stress can feel like a heart problem!) then this can eventually create a vicious circle causing you to get more and more stressed – eventually hyperventilating and passing out as a result. This is what happens in the case of an anxiety attack!

Moreover, this is also how we respond to being in debt. Or hating our jobs. Or waiting to hear back about an offer we put on a house.

But we can't run away from these problems and we can't fight them. And this then means that the fight or flight response can continue on a 'low level' for a long duration of time. This is what we call chronic stress and it's bad for all *kinds* of reasons.

For starters, chronic stress means that our immune system and digestion are suppressed for long periods of time. This can lead to malabsorption as we become less able to extract nutrients from our food. And it can prevent us from sleeping and make us more immune to disease.

What's more, is that eventually this stress can cause us to 'run out' of the catecholamine neurotransmitters that allow us to focus. This is called 'adrenal fatigue' and it's linked with depression and chronic anxiety.

Note as well that no neurotransmitter and no hormones work in a vacuum. If you increase one, you alter others. And when you increase cortisol (associated with chronic stress in particular) you also increase ghrelin – the hunger hormone. This also encourages something called 'lipogenesis' meaning that more of the fuels in your diet will be stored as fat rather than used for energy. In fact, cortisol even breaks down muscle by producing something called myostatin which signals the body to break down muscle for energy. So it's important for your physique as well that you learn not to feel stressed when it isn't useful.

This is why it's so important that we learn to respond appropriately to the situation at hand and to suppress stress when it isn't appropriate – so that we can carry on enjoying life and staying healthy.

Mindfulness is the path to that eventuality.

Positive Stress

But the thing is, there is such thing as 'positive stress'. The aim here is not to completely remove stress from your life, rather it is just to control it.

As we've already seen, stress is a positive tool if you're trying to enhance your physical performance. If you're in a race, or if you're surfing, then this response is exactly what you need in order to get things done.

But the ideal situation would be that you get all the benefits of the fight or flight response, without the negatives. Imagine if you could gain that focus and that increased muscle mass but *without* the sense of dread and fear.

As it happens, just such a state may exist. This is what psychologists call a 'flow state' and it tends to be triggered during moments where we are highly focussed on something that we also actually enjoy. The example given most often is extreme sports, where some athletes describe the world seeming to slow down around them while they pull off amazing moves and feel more alive than they ever have done.

We also experience flow when we're completely focussed on the work we're doing, or when we're so deep in concentration that we forget the time and speak through the night. During this state, we produce similar neurotransmitters and hormones but with the addition of another one called 'anandamide' – the bliss hormone that is also connected to abstract and creative thinking. It's actually the same chemical that gives marijuana its effect but what most people don't know is that it's also produced naturally by the brain.

Remember though that again this isn't really just 'one state' but rather a spectrum. We can be slightly stressed and very stressed. We can be slightly alert, or very alert. We can be alert and angry, alert and happy or alert and scared. It's useful to think of the brain in terms of 'states' but just be aware that there are countless states *in between* as well and it's more likely that you're somewhere here on the spectrum.

Flow states help us to perform at our best and focus more but they don't cause the same negative effects as a typical fight or flight. The difference? Enjoyment. So if you can try and tap into the enjoyment of what you're doing and see it as a fun *challenge* rather than something terrible, then you're more likely to get into that flow. Find the fun in what you're doing, find what you're passionate about in it and learn to actually enjoy it. You can do all this using very similar strategies to the cognitive restructuring we've already seen.

And likewise, you also need a low level of 'eustress'. Eustress is the equivalent of chronic stress but is once again a more positive form. Eustress is the kind of stress that motivates us to do things. For example, if you have an exam coming up and you don't experience any stress at all, then there is a good chance that you're not going to revise for it and as such, you won't get very good grades. Having just the right amount of low level 'stress' is what you need to make sure you start revising early and do the best you can. Eustress doesn't just have to mean negative

motivation, it can also mean positive motivation – for instance stress that you might not achieve the things you really want to achieve. It's stress but it's based around something positive.

Tapping Into Hidden Powers

Then there's the type of stress that can unlock even more physical and mental potential. I'm not saying that anyone is going to be able to train themselves to the point where they can access this potential; all I'm saying is that it exists which is highly interesting and hopefully outlines the possibilities that exist and the reason that accessing more of your mind and your emotions is so potentially powerful.

So with that in mind, the first example is something called a 'flashbulb memory'. This demonstrates the ability we have to memorize things in vivid detail if we think the event is important enough. Think back to where you were at the time you first heard of the 9/11 attacks, or perhaps where you were when you first heard about Michael Jackson. Alternatively, consider a moment that was particularly important in your own life – for good or for bad.

Chances are that you can remember these events in far more accurate detail than you can other parts of your biographical memory. This is what's known as a 'flashbulb memory'. Partly this is the result of repeated rehearsing: when something important happens, we play it over and over again in our minds. But it's also the result of neurotransmitters being released that change the way the memory is laid down and make those connections significantly stronger.

Then there's crisis strength. Crisis strength, also known as hysterical strength, is the name given to incidents where people suddenly tap into incredible strength. The classic example here is the Mother who manages to lift a vehicle off of their trapped child underneath. How is this possible? While there is very little in the way of scientific research looking at this phenomenon, there is a real theory as to how it might work.

When you contract your muscle normally to lift something, your brain sends signals that travel through your central nervous system and to the 'neuromuscular junction'. Acetylcholine (yes, the neurotransmitter) is released and this causes muscle fibers to fire. Only we're never quite

capable of recruiting 100% of those muscle fibers. On average, we recruit around 30% of them and even a trained athlete will only be able to get up to around 50%.

This is thought to be an evolutionary limitation – the idea being that recruiting 100% of our muscle would leave us completely exhausted and vulnerable to attack. Moreover, it could actually cause injury by placing too much strain on our connective tissues and joints.

But to demonstrate the kind of strength we *actually* have hidden away, just watch anyone who gets an electric shock and gets thrown across the room. This is caused not by the electricity itself but by the individual's muscles when they forcibly contract in response to the shock. This causes them to access 100% of their muscle fiber which is enough to catapult them across the room, even though they aren't using a jumping technique!

And there's one other way we seem to be able to tap into greater muscle contraction: by stimulating the release of the catecholamine neurotransmitters and fight or flight hormones. It is hypothesized that under times of intense stress, we can engage much more muscle mass and thereby achieve superhuman strength.

And again this is a spectrum. Actually, causing even a minor fight or flight response is enough to somewhat increase your strength in the gym. Studies show that if we train with loud noises in the background, or if we train while shouting (which also stimulates the release of similar hormones) we are actually capable of engaging more muscle.

So psyching yourself up before a workout just might be one of the very best ways to improve your performance in the gym!

Controlling, not suppressing stress might just be the secret to unlocking your full potential.



CHAPTER 6 – WHY YOU SHOULD VISUALIZE

Chapter 6: Why You Should Visualize

So far we've looked at using meditation and cognitive restructuring to change our mental states. But actually, it might be the case that visualization is even more useful and even more important.

Most people believe that we think in 'thoughts'. That is to say that we have an inner monologue that works like the thought boxes in comic books. More recent research though suggests that we can think in lots of modalities: sometimes we visualize, sometimes we imagine our bodies doing something and almost 'feel' what we're thinking and sometimes we just 'know'. This latter example is called 'unsymbolized thought'.

And in fact, thinking with our bodies and our senses might just be what enabled us to develop thought in the first place...

Embodied Cognition

Briefly, embodied cognition is the idea that all our thoughts eventually relate back to physical experience.

When someone says something to you, or when you think something, your brain interprets this in such a way that gives it meaning. You don't inherently understand language, which means the brain must be 'translating' it into some kind of pure meaning.

Psychologists once believed that the brain had a language of its own that they called 'mentalese'. More recently though, more and more experts adopted the belief that we understand things by visualizing them. When someone says tells you a story, you understand the story because your brain visualizes it happening to you.

When someone tells you they walked through the snow, you visualize the color white, you imagine the cool air on your skin and you almost hear the sound of the crunching snow underfoot. When we think 'higher level' thoughts, we understand them only because we can relate them back to physical experiences via abstraction. Maths after all is fundamentally based on counting...

This is also consistent with the idea that areas of our brain light up during visualization just as though we were really engaging in the action. If you imagine swinging a golf club, then neurons relating to that movement will fire in your brain.

And as far as your brain and body is concerned, that might as well be happening!

So it makes a lot of sense to combine visualization with your meditation training and with your restructuring. Don't believe that visualization can 'trick' your brain into thinking something is happening and thereby alter your emotional state? Then just try relieving your most upsetting moments, or imagining scenes from a very sad movie. You'll start to feel incredibly sad in no time...

Visualization for Productivity

One way to use this power of visualization that is well understood, is to go to a 'happy place' during meditation. If you can't meditate in a calm and beautiful environment, then at least you can simulate it in your mind's eye by imagining you're on a beautiful beach, in a log cabin in the mountains, or in a large field getting plenty of sun.

But you can also use visualization in order to alter your emotional state in other ways.

For example, if you're struggling to focus on your work, then you might utilize visualization to create a little eustress to motivate you. To do this, you simply need to remember *why* you're doing the work and why it's important to you. Let's say that you're working towards a presentation for a meeting: visualize just how great it would feel to conquer that presentation and knock it out the part. Then visualize what doing that repeatedly could one day lead to: a better career and a better salary for instance.

Now visualize the opposite: imagine it going wrong and remember why it matters.

You can do the same thing with almost anything you're struggling to focus on. By linking what you're doing back to the emotional hook and the reason you're doing it, you can much more effectively find the determination and drive you need to complete it. Keep your goals in mind and you'll be much more motivated every day to get out of bed and start working out, or to work on your personal project, or to put in your very best performance at work.



CHAPTER 7 – THE POWER OF BELIEF

Chapter 7: The Power of Belief

What a lot of people will want to use these tools for is to increase their confidence and their self-esteem.

This is one reason we're often told to visualize ourselves obtaining our goals. When you visualize yourself obtaining a goal, you produce neurotransmitters and hormones *as though* you had achieved that goal. As far as your brain is concerned, that has already happened. This then makes you much more likely to perform well when you actually attempt that thing.

Likewise though, when we *unintentionally* visualize ourselves falling, or stuttering up on stage, this actually causes us to produce more fight or flight hormones which in turn makes us nervous and makes us much more likely to actually do those things.

So don't just restructure your thoughts, try to picture things going well – and with the backing of your cognitive restructuring you should know that this is actually what's more *likely* to happen.

How to Become Socially Fearless With Hypothesis Testing

In general, removing anxiety and increasing our confidence is a very important tool and the more you can recognize the power of simply believing in your own ability, the more things will start to go your way.

Another tool you can use then, is to completely remove social anxiety using hypothesis testing. Most of us have *some* social anxiety even if we're generally confident and by removing this, we can become much more successful.

Let's start by asking why confidence matters in the first place. The simple answer is that when you're confident, others think they should *also* be confident in you. This sends the evolutionary signal that you must be higher in the pecking order than them – it makes the opposite sex think that you must be a good catch and it makes the same sex think that you must be an important and influential figure.

But when we stutter and stammer, it suggests that we aren't confident in either the content of what we're saying, or our own importance. Either way, this then makes people less likely to believe us and it makes them think that if we're shy of them, they must be superior to us. The hierarchy has now established us in a much weaker position. It doesn't mean they'll be cruel, it simply means that we're not in a position of power and influence.

Using hypothesis testing though, it's possible to go one step further and to completely transform the way that people think of you and the way you interact with others.

To do this, you're simply going to remove the anxiety you previously had when speaking to people by testing the outcome of it going wrong. So find a shop that you don't often shop in and then go up to the counter to order something. When you do, do it using a funny voice, say something purposefully awkward, or stand in silence for a moment. It will be awkward and painful and it will trigger your fight or flight response. But breathe and try not to get too anxious. What you'll learn is that nothing bad comes of this experiment and the transaction is completed as normal.

That was the worst case scenario and nothing bad happened! Do this a bit more and over time, the reassociation will also kick in and you'll learn that there's really nothing to be afraid of. Eventually things like interviews, dates and other social scenarios will be far less scary and will trigger much less of a stress response. The result? You'll seem so confident and at ease, that your charisma and influence will increase drastically.

The Law of Attraction

But even without this step, simply practicing mindfulness and learning to distance yourself from your thoughts will help you to become calmer and more confident. And it will also help you to detach from negative emotions and to thereby increase your self-value. There are even types of meditation that involve meditating *on* the things you love about yourself.

However you achieve it, increasing your self-worth and confidence can eventually start to make all kinds of things happen in your life. This is called 'the law of attraction' and it simply means that when you believe yourself to be one way, you *become* that way.

So when you think of yourself as a highly successful high flyer who will no doubt be rich one day, that's how others will perceive you and that's how you'll act. You'll present yourself as someone more confident, you'll take on jobs with more responsibility and you'll even dress the part. And when others think of you that way and you start taking more opportunities for promotions etc., then you'll start to actually climb the ladder.

Conclusions

We've covered an awful lot of ground in this book but hopefully you now realize that mindfulness is much more than just a powerful form of meditation. Sure, it is that as well, but more than this mindfulness simply means being more aware of your own thoughts, your own body and your own beliefs and visualizations. When we do this, it allows us to decide how we want to feel, how we want to act and what we want to believe. Instead of letting the body and mind be reactive to our surroundings, we instead learn to second guess ourselves and to make sure we are in the best possible state of mind and emotional state for the current situation.

That might mean being more alert so we can focus on work. It might mean being calmer for our health and for our social interactions. It might mean being more psyched up for the gym. Or it might just mean being a bit kinder to ourselves or changing the way we speak.

Mindfulness is the key to unlocking the full potential of your body and mind. And when you can do that, all kinds of doors start to open up for you...