

Working with Distraction

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From patient care to inter-personal relationships, the ability to be fully present for what is unfolding in our present moment awareness is key to responding in ways that lead to best outcomes. However, distraction—including the distraction of our own busy minds--frequently stands in the way of us attending to what is most important in any given moment and there is growing evidence that distraction is also a significant factor in stress and burnout.

In this workshop, participants will have any opportunity to explore practical strategies for working with different types of distraction in order to be more fully present for things that really matter. Topics to be explored include:

- The negative impact of distraction on patient care, interpersonal relationships, mental health, physical health, and the overall wellbeing of the workplace community.
- The neuroscience of distraction.
- The neuroscience of attention and how mindfulness practices can be utilized to strengthen the capacity to maintain focused attention in busy work environments.
- Ideas for identifying and reducing unnecessary distraction in the work environment.

Participant Notes

Mindfulness Defined

As defined by the founder of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), the definition of mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

Paying attention: Scientists believe that the ability for humans to think and KNOW that they are thinking is an ability that separates humans from other species. The term for this is metacognition and metacognition is what allows us to recognize when we are lost in thought. The ability to be attentive is the foundational skill for awareness and focus and is what connects us to our present moment experience.

On purpose: Mindfulness is an intentional practice. We have the capacity to **choose** to be fully present and attentive to the present moment. If we don't make this choice, the brain will default to mind wandering.

In the present moment: The present moment is the only moment that matters. It is the only moment in which we can live our lives. It is the only moment in which we will find joy, connection, love, opportunity. Mindfulness expands our capacity to notice when the mind is wandering, to return our attention to the present moment, and to keep it there longer.

Without judgment: Mindfulness teaches us to be open to whatever experience the present moment brings. Rather than succumbing to the need to label everything as good/bad, pleasure/pain, we cultivate the capacity to bring some curiosity to what we are experiencing.

Mindfulness is a state of awareness that is cultivated through practices such as meditation. Mindfulness is the ability to intentionally bring our awareness out of distraction and into our present moment experience, doing so without judgment of ourselves, others, or the circumstances of the

situation. In cultivating this ability to be fully present, we gain greater awareness of when the mind is distracted and the ways in which distraction prevents clarity, connection, and compassion.

The Power of the Present Moment

The brain is hard-wired to think and, left to its own devices, the prefrontal cortex will automatically begin to drift away from the experience of the present moment and into thought. As a result, we spend much of our lives in a state of distraction—thinking about the past or the future—only to miss out on the present moment, the **ONLY** moment we have to live and the only moment we can affect. Mindfulness allows us to recognize when we are lost in thought (that recognition being a capacity referred to as metacognition) and intentionally bring our attention back to the present moment.

In 2010 researchers at Harvard University published a study that examined mind wandering. Their data showed that test subjects were not paying attention to what they were doing 46.9% of the time. Researchers also found a correlation between mind wandering and feelings of unhappiness, regardless of what activity the test subjects were engaged in. In other words, even when doing something that would be pleasurable, thinking about something else caused test subjects to experience feelings of unhappiness. This research suggests that for almost half of our waking hours, we are not fully present for what is happening in our lives. Imagine how many opportunities for joy, connection, and creativity we can miss in that amount of time! And not only that, these researchers concluded that “a wandering mind is an unhappy mind”.

How does Mindfulness work?

Very simply mindfulness trains the mind to focus and refocus over and over again, freeing us from the random thinking patterns of our busy minds. Each time we bring the mind back to the present moment, we create new neural networks that are connected with **sustained attention**. This reorganization of neuronal networks and alteration of neuronal function within our nervous system over time is referred to as **neuroplasticity**. Like building muscle at the gym--when we use our minds in a particular way we physically change and rewire the brain over time. Each time the mind wanders and we bring it back to the present moment, we build the neural networks of attention and focus.

Through mindfulness practice we learn about where the mind wants to go and we can learn the pattern of our preoccupations. Every time we notice that we're thinking we have a moment of **metacognitive awareness**. Specifically, mindfulness as an expression of metacognition is:

- The skill of **seeing** that the mind is not where you want it to be
- The skill of **detaching** the mind from where you don't want it to be.
- The skill of **placing** the mind where you want it to be.
- The skill of **keeping** the mind where you want it to be.

How do we know Mindfulness works?

Since 1979 when Jon Kabat-Zinn recruited patients suffering from chronic pain to participate in the first 8-week stress reduction course that served as the prototype for what we now call Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), thousands of behavioral, medical, and neuroscientific studies have examined the effects of meditation on the brain. Demonstrated behavioral benefits include reduced psychological stress, increased empathy, and improved working memory capacity and attention. Studies have

demonstrated that meditation can decrease negative emotions; shift brain activity into the left prefrontal cortex—an area of the brain associated with happiness and optimism; and improve physical health.

The introduction of the functional MRI (fMRI) in 1990 has allowed neuroscience research to study the effects of meditation on the brain. fMRI studies have demonstrated that the activity and the size of the amygdala (the primitive part of the brain associated with fight or flight response) is decreased in meditators compared to non-meditators. A 2003 workplace study demonstrated increased activity in the left prefrontal cortex and the experience of feeling more energized, alert and joyful in workers who practiced meditation. There was also an improved response to flu vaccination in this group compared to non-meditators. Additional studies examining the impact of meditation on the immune system have demonstrated reduced cortisol levels, less decline in CD4+ T cells in HIV+ patients; and faster resolution of lesions in patients suffering from psoriasis.

A 2009 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association demonstrated that training in mindfulness meditation reduced psychological distress and burnout in physicians and improved their well-being while also expanding their capacity to relate to patients which, in turn, resulted in enhanced care.

Distraction Due to Technology

Research abounds on the perilous impact of technology in society. Our attention spans are getting shorter, our long-term memory is degraded, and as a result, we are feeling less connected to one another. Emails, texts, social media—how often do these things divert our attention from attending to what really matters in the present moment? We now live in a state of what can be described as “continual partial attention”—a state where we are only slightly aware of what is happening around us and very much lost in thought. It has become increasingly difficult for many of us to maintain sustained attention.

Technology, in particular portable technology, is by design, both distracting and addictive. When we engage with these devices, we are typically swiping and scrolling—jumping from one thing to another rather than investing sustained attention on any one thing. This very act of jumping from one thing to another, trains the brain to be more easily distracted. To make this worse, the anticipation of that next thing—whether it is triggered by seeing an alert that may signal a Facebook like, something new on your Twitter feed, or even just seeing your device and wondering if there is anything new—results in the brain releasing dopamine. Dopamine is a reward, a really powerful reward, that reinforces whatever behavior preceded it because it makes us feel good. But it doesn't last very long so, as it wears off, we are compelled to seek out another hit. This dopamine hit reinforces the checking, swiping, scrolling behaviors associated with personal technology. It also reinforces the need to keep personal technology close at hand and feeds into the anxiety we often feel when separated from our devices.

Multi-tasking

In the workplace, we embrace the idea that multi-tasking is a valuable and effective work strategy. The fast pace of clinical practice in the technological age requires the juggling of multiple tasks (a multiple technology platforms) but we are mistaken in thinking that we can focus on multiple sources of

cognitive-rich input simultaneously. The truth is that we alternate between tasks, “juggling” them sequentially. Studies have shown that each time we switch tasks, the brain needs time to recover and, during the recovery period, we work less effectively and are more prone to mistakes.

Multi-tasking affect the brain somewhat like driving a standard transmission in stop and go traffic on the interstate affects the transmission. We have to downshift, stop, and go back through gears to get up to speed again. When we do this over and over in a car, it is hard on the transmission and horrible for gas mileage. When we do this with the brain, we diminish working memory and make mistakes. Like with car, the more often we stop and start whatever we are doing, the greater the cost. However, the perception that we are successfully doing two things at once causes the brain to release dopamine. So, this rapid serial tasking feels good so we keep doing it and, in so doing, train the brain for distraction rather than sustained attention.

Addicted to Distraction

Addiction is defined as continued use despite adverse consequences and, in his book *The Craving Mind*, Judson Brewer suggests that distraction can be classified as an addiction. Neuroscientific investigation has revealed a relationship between the dopaminergic response in the brain and a range of distractions from daydreaming to smartphone use—the same response that occurs with substance addiction. This dopamine response sets the stage for cravings that trigger behaviors related to distraction. We experience this when we see someone check their smartphone and then feel an overwhelming urge to check our own, or when we are triggered by a notification to check an email or text at the expense of being distracted from a conversation we are having.

Training the Mind

Mindfulness practices provide an opportunity to work with the mind in a way that strengthens the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain associated with cognitive control while reducing the activity of the medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex, areas of the brain involved in the self-referential, impulsive reacting. When we practice being mindful—noticing when the mind is wandering and choosing to bring attention back our present moment experience—we are harnessing neuroplasticity to create and strengthen connections in the brain that lead to a greater capacity to focus and sustain attention skillfully.

It’s important to note that the brain is always being trained and that we also unconsciously train the brain to be more distracted and less focused. Our smartphones and other devices are potent trainers as is the act of multi-tasking. Unconsciously, we spend much of our day engaged with activities that adversely affect focus and the capacity to maintain sustained attention. There are, however, strategies available to us that can reduce harmful training of the brain and foster positive training of the brain.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the harmful training is to pay attention to how we use technology starting with setting some limits on use. We might “use” at predetermined times or commit to “using” it less. We can also just bring some mindful attention to our use—observing our patterns, noticing how we really feel after a social media binge, for instance.

We can also pay attention to how we work. Rather than working under the delusion that multi-tasking is possible, a good start might be to call what we are doing “serial tasking”. There can still be times when we need to switch back and forth between two things but we can pay attention to that—recognizing that like the person driving the standard transmission car in stop and go traffic—there is a cognitive cost to this and that it pays to keep this to a minimum.

Finally, we can commit to practices that strengthen the neural networks of focus and attention like meditation. Meditation provides an antidote to the inevitable brain training that results from all the distractions embedded in our workplace and home environments. I think of the impact of distraction on my brain somewhat like the impact that lying on the couch watching Netflix and eating chocolate chip cookie dough would have on my body and meditation like the work-out I might do the next day. It is still important to have some self-restraint but cookie dough and distraction happen so work-outs and meditation are a good idea.

Mindful Practices

There are two ways to practice mindfulness. The first is formal practice. Formal practices commonly taught in the context of mindfulness include meditation (which can be practiced seated, standing, or walking), body scan, and mindful yoga. All three of these practices are considered meditation practices and all three serve to cultivate awareness of the body, awareness of thinking and thoughts, awareness of the emotions and feeling tone, and an increased capacity to sustain focus and attention.

Informal practices refer to utilizing daily activities (i.e., brushing the teeth, preparing food, driving, taking a walk) as opportunities to bring our full attention to what we are doing, noticing when the mind is wandering, and coming back to the task at hand. Informal practice are really helpful because they offer many opportunities to practice being mindful in the context of normal day to day activities.

References

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