



## Attention

Learning to pay attention is the bedrock of cultivating meaning and a life worth living. What you pay attention to, how you pay attention to it, and what you don't pay attention to, generates your experience of the world. In fact it would probably be true to say that attention is the most important determinant of your perception of the world, how you understand yourself and your place in the world. It is the starting point of all experience of meaning and of cultivating a life that is worth living.

Being unaware of feelings, bodily sensations, thoughts and the world around you means that your responses to them will be automatic, impulsive and careless. Under these circumstances, things happen *to* you. On the other hand, being attentive to them means that responses can be carefully considered, leaving you with a comfortable knowledge that you are in control of your life. Now things happen *with* you.

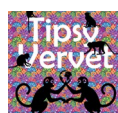
So what is it that you need to become attentive to?

- How your body feels
- Emotions and feelings and what they are trying to tell you
- Your aspirations and hopes and where you would like to be in life
- The world around you

One of the best ways to start to cultivate attention is mindful meditation. However, mediation is not for everybody. There are small mindful exercise that you can practice throughout the day. The more you practice, the more they become second nature and will be available to you when you need them.

Here are some examples:

- Notice how your body posture influences your thoughts and feelings.
- Notice how your thoughts and feelings influence your body posture.
- Notice how your feelings influence your thoughts, and how your thoughts influence your feelings.
- Notice how music changes your feelings and your thoughts.
- Turn your attention, on purpose, to (1) a part of your body (e.g., your right hand); (2) what you can hear; (3) what you can see. Concentrate on that for a few seconds. Notice how thoughts immediately before doing that disappear.
- Pay attention to what it feels like to brush your teeth, stand in the shower, eat something, wash your hands under a tap.
- Write.
- Walk, paying attention to what it feels like to walk.



When we are not attentive, our mind can easily settle into ruminating where our thoughts spiral around in our head, often in a negative direction. For people who use alcohol or other substances, or who are prone to negative states of mind, this spirally down can lead to feeling worse about ourselves, depression, anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. Small attentive exercises like the ones described above can help to break that cycle.

### **Noticing what brings me down and what builds me up**

A simple exercise to help you identify things in your life that either bring you down or make you feel better is to assign a score to how you feel before you do an activity, spend time with a specific person, or eat particular types of food. 0 = you feel the worst you have ever felt; 10 = you feel the best you have ever felt. Do this again afterwards. If your score has dropped afterwards, you might want to reconsider how or whether you do that again.

### **Ruminating over the worst that could happen**

Many of us let our minds run away with imagining and fearing the worst. This is called catastrophising – turning things that haven't even happened yet into a catastrophe.

Here are some simple things you can do to get on top of that.

1. Write down what it is that you fear will happen.
2. Write down what I would do if that happened.
3. Write down what the probability of that happening is.
4. Write down 3 reasons why it won't happen.
5. Write down 3 things I can do now to reduce the probability of it happening.
6. Write down at least one good thing that would come about if this thing I fear does happen.
7. Write down what did happen.

When you do this exercise, you write down what you fear will happen (1) and what actually did happen (7). You turn your attention to what did happen and what did not happen. Over time, you learn that, although you may still fear the worst happening, it seldom does. It's not about not necessarily fearing the worst, it's about changing your relationship to your catastrophising so that you can see it for what it really is – thoughts that come into your head, but they are not reality.

You turn your attention to the fact that the likelihood of the worst happening is usually quite small (3,4), and that, even if it did happen, it will not be a disaster (6). Furthermore, you have a plan of action and will be able to overcome it, or seek help to manage it (2).

You turn your attention to what you can do to prevent it happening (5).

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