Mindfulness Hurts. That’s Why It Works.

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Some years ago, a friend told me that his marriage was suffering because he was on the road so much for work. I started counseling him on how to fix things—to move more meetings online, to make do with less money. But no matter what I suggested, he always had a counterargument for why it was impossible. Finally, it dawned on me: His issue wasn’t a logistics or work-management problem. It was a home problem. As he ultimately acknowledged, he didn’t like being there, but he was unwilling to confront the real source of his troubles.

Many of us, even if we don’t travel for work, do something similar by avoiding spending time in the home of our own mind. If being fully present—or in the parlance of modern meditators, being mindful—is boring, or stressful, or sad, or scary, you’re not going to want to do it very much. You can have a more pleasant time being psychologically out of town, as it were.

But you should work to be more mindful anyway. As I told my friend, he’d be better off facing the problems in his marriage and trying to solve them, rather than living in a hotel off the interstate five days a week. Similarly, avoiding mindfulness will make the feelings you are avoiding worse, not better. Dealing with them is a more rewarding, if perhaps more daunting, strategy.

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