

Waking Up: Using Mindfulness Meditation in Graduate School

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For the last two years, I have been asleep. Not in the literal sense of sleeping, but in the sense of acting automatically, forever attending to the past or what would be happening in the future, but rarely paying attention to the present moment. My first “wake-up” call, or at least the first one that I listened to, was about one year ago, in the form of a serious illness that I thought was just a really bad headache. After that experience, I knew something in my life needed to change, but I was not sure what it was or how to get there. That *something different* showed up a few months later. This past semester, I took a mindfulness group course as part of my practicum experience. Although I was interested, I was also definitely skeptical; my previous attempts to put my clinical training into practice had not worked, so why should mindfulness meditation be effective? Surprisingly, it worked.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ACT MINDFULLY?

In the simplest terms, it means to be fully awake to the present moment, accepting without judgment all that the present moment provides. For example, as graduate students, we regularly encounter evaluative benchmarks, such as dissertation proposals and qualifying examinations, which can produce high levels of stress and anxiety. The stress and anxiety are sources of information, but the automatic judgment is often, “this is bad,” and, “I want to get rid of it.” In acting automatically, such as by distraction, we may lose the opportunity for effective behavioral change. Although meditation may appear to others as if those practicing are in a trance, daydreaming, or sleeping, meditators are actively practicing *non-doing*, attending to the present moment without changing anything. In the few months that I have meditated, I have learned some powerful lessons.

Getting back to the basics – Attending to basic physical needs is the most essential ingredient for healthy functioning, yet I have often perceived this area as an optional, or at least flexible, part of life. Trimming off one or two hours of sleep to work, shoveling down microwaveable meals while simultaneously reading articles or running a literature search, and classifying “exercise” as the walk from the parking lot to the psychology department building are all familiar behaviors, all easy to do mindlessly. A colleague of mine instituted the “seven hour rule,” meaning that she gets seven hours of sleep a night, even if she has work left unfinished. The rule was enacted after she drove home one night and could not remember a large portion of the drive.

DISCOVER TRUE VALUES AND LIVE ACCORDING TO THEM

In the hectic pace of graduate school, it is easy to lose sight of deeply-held personal values. Projects may take the place of long-term relationships, and gossip about the newest department happenings supplants scholarly discussion of issues inside and outside of psychology. In acting mindlessly, goals and beliefs can become lost. While in graduate school, I have lost important relationships and damaged relationships with others who, only through their own graciousness and understanding, decided to ride it out. Meditation practice can allow us to investigate our personal values and more thoroughly examine our everyday decision-making processes.

Clinging leads to suffering – I have been called the “Queen Ruminator,” and it is an appropriate title. Sessions with clients, conversations, what I should be doing, and someone cutting me off in traffic all provide fodder to be replayed endlessly in my mind. I have been immobilized by fears and worries, resulting in more suffering. I still ruminate and cling to how life “should” be, but thoughts and feelings that once hung around for hours, days, even weeks have lost some impact and are released far sooner than before. The dirty dishes in my sink are exactly that – dirty dishes in my sink – not some ultimate sign that my life is falling apart. Learning to accept thoughts as thoughts, feelings as feelings, and mistakes as mistakes can be one of the greatest benefits of mindfulness practice.

Even as a novice, I have experienced many benefits of regular meditation practice. The difficulties with depression and anxiety that have overwhelmed me in the past are managed more skillfully. I would be remiss not to mention there have been times when I felt it would have been easier never to have begun mindfulness meditation. Being fully awake to the present moment has brought up existential concerns, such as living authentically and searching for true meaning in my life. It has been terrifying to wrestle with the thoughts that I may have spent years of my life in inauthentic pursuits, but the idea of never realizing this or realizing it too late, is even more terrifying. I may not yet be fully awake, but I am definitely waking up.

These ideas have been discussed by others far more eloquent than myself. They are not novel or unfamiliar concepts to most. There are other methods for experiencing the world in this manner. Mindfulness meditation is the path that I have found useful in actively living this knowledge in my life. For more information, Jon Kabat-Zinn’s *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* is an excellent introduction to mindfulness practice.