



## Mindful Living: Developing Our Mindfulness Muscles

### SPEAKERS

Seena Haines, Tierney King, Stuart Haines

#### **Tierney King 00:01**

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by The Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. I want to take a moment real quick to say thank you to all of our listeners. The support from every single one of you has been truly inspiring. And Faculty Focus could not do this without you. So this will be our last episode of the 2023 season, but we'll be back in 2024 with new content and new episodes. As we wind down in the month of December, I'm always in awe of how fast it goes by. It's my favorite season. It's full of different holidays, but it always goes by in the blink of an eye. So I thought it'd be a good reminder to slow down this month to really practice our mindfulness muscles. It's the season of giving, so let's give ourselves a break and remind ourselves of what we can do to really live in the moment. Today we have Seena and Stuart Haines who will dive into mindfulness and offer strategies on how we can build our mindfulness muscles. We have a virtual workshop they offer called Mind Full to Mindful: Strategies to Enhance Teaching and Learning, an online course they offer called The Wellbeing Elixir, and then a Wellbeing Elixir community with numerous resources. All of the links for these will be in the recommended resources in the episode description.

#### **Stuart Haines 01:31**

So what is mindfulness? At its core, mindfulness is about regulating attention, and being aware of our thoughts, emotions, and sensations, our body, as well as what's happening in our surroundings. And in order to do this, our minds can dwell on things that have happened in the past, or engage in making plans for the future. Another critical element of mindfulness is learning how to observe without judgment, trying our best to be objective, to experience the here and now without labeling what we're experiencing as either good or bad. It just is. Now the essential elements of mindfulness include directing our attention, and becoming aware of what's happening in our minds, our bodies, and in the environment around us to simply accept the experience with our judgment, or attachment or identification, to be an observer. And in so doing, rather than reacting in an automatic way to external stimuli or triggers, it creates the opportunity to engage in choice to respond in some way of our choosing. Unfortunately, mindlessness is the norm. Today, we rush through our daily activities on autopilot. And if you're like me, you probably aren't aware of the physical tension that builds up in your body throughout the day. And you don't notice it until you get home at night or you try to go to sleep.

We spend most of our days thinking about things that happened in the past, or making plans for the future. Many of us eat mindlessly. And I know that I'm guilty of reacting often in negative ways to things that happen to me throughout the day. And in this era of smartphones and laptop computers. We are bombarded with stimuli notifications and distractions all day long. The goal of mindfulness practices is to help us become more aware of our thoughts and to get out of our thought loops. When we recognize that we are caught up in thinking about past events, ruminating about some comment made by a colleague or a student on an end-of-course evaluation, we can really direct our minds to pay attention to what's most important, right here and right now. So instead of spending a tiny sliver of our lives, paying attention to what's happening right now, developing our mindfulness muscles allows us to spend far more of our time being present, to be present with the people we care about, to fully engage in our work and get into those flow states. And to be more aware of our thoughts and feelings, so that we can respond in constructive ways. And now, don't get me wrong thoughts are very useful. They are the source of our ideas or creativity or inspiration. It's our thoughts that allow us to experience positive emotions like gratitude. And we can save our past experiences in our minds, and experience hope for the future which motivates us to plan and organize our action. But our thoughts can also be problematic. Instead of having hope and making plans, we can get stressed out about what might happen. We can develop an anxiety disorder that prevents us from taking action like interacting with people we don't know very well, or floods us with a sense of impending doom like feeling trapped in a small space, or perhaps taking an exam. And when we're feeling anxious, our ability to think clearly and objectively is impaired. We can also get stucked in destructive loops, thinking about past events, typically traumatic event. And we often engage in negative self-talk, berating and belittling ourselves. And as you can imagine, when we are trapped in these thought patterns, it's it's hard to be receptive to new information to be open to new ways of thinking, and doing and learning really requires us to be present, to be attentive to be open and to be receptive. So when we engage in mindfulness practices, we're developing this skill to recognize our thoughts and make a deliberate choice. We're learning how to be an objective observer of our minds and bodies.

**Tierney King 06:14**

Next, Seena will ask you a series of questions. If you answer yes to any of them or agree with some of these statements, she'll explain how the science of mindfulness can help regulate our thoughts, our emotions and our immediate responses.

**Seena Haines 06:29**

Do you often find yourself rushing through activities without being attentive to them? Or failing to notice feelings of physical tension? Body sensations? Are you preoccupied with thoughts, thoughts about the past ruminating, fear about the future, catastrophizing? Or maybe you find yourself eating or snacking without awareness of your speed or the volume of food you're consuming. Maybe this is happening while you're watching television, or scrolling kind of mindlessly on your device, falling into cycles of automaticity - mindlessly. Also, I'm curious if you experience any of these symptoms, and signs of stress, how many do you identify having frequently? Do you have feelings of anxiousness and worry? Irritability and agitation? Feeling easily annoyed, defensive with others, restless sleep, maybe even grinding your teeth when you're sleeping, having low energy levels, even though you might feel like you had some quality sleep you wake up feeling tired? Your mind is restless. You might be very self-critical or very critical of others, lack concentration, feel uninspired by your work, or by your hobbies and

interests, having headaches and migraines or some other chronic ailment. So our bodies can be impacted by chronic stress. Our brain is impacted by chronic stress. So let's take a look at what happens in our brain when we feel sources of chronic stress. Our brain helps protect us by examining what is going on in our environment constantly. This is why we call it the survival brain. Our limbic system works in concert to help regulate our emotions at the same time, and our prefrontal cortex is where we have linear thinking, our logical thinking, our communication and listening skills, feelings of being more calm and focused. When our brain perceives a threat or danger, we will move into survival mode. This can lead to elevations in heart rate and blood pressure, our breathing can become irregular, our temperature might elevate, we have disruptions in our sleep cycle, blood is being rerouted in your body in case you need to flee from physical harm. And while our emotional brain intensifies, so that we can adapt quickly, that smarter brain, the prefrontal cortex, heads offline. And so our ability to problem solve has dampened our critical thinking, communication, and listening skills. And when we get stuck in this chronic stress cycle, it can become very maladaptive for us and harmful for us. The good news is that by practicing mindfulness, we can control racing thoughts, non productive thoughts, the emotional roller coaster triggered by stress signals and hormone release to help us better self regulate.

**Stuart Haines** 09:45

So our thoughts are a very powerful tool. They're very important to our work as academicians, for certain, but they're often difficult to turn off when when we don't want to have them. So try to not think about a white elephant right now, that's all your mind is going to dwell on is a white elephant. And the more I say it, the more difficult it is. You're going to have to forget about it. So any thought that we kind of have, and if we try to push it away, we will invariably continue to have that thought. It's also, you know, because our thoughts are with us, we're more likely to be disconnected from the present meaning, the things that are going on in our environment or in our body. And they can become problematic when we begin to think that our thoughts are the truth. And in fact, our thoughts are not the truth. The truth is far more complex than our thoughts, far more nuanced than our thoughts. But we often have dichotomous kind of thinking. And we often have rigid thinking about certain beliefs, and we all have them. And it's important to survive that we come up with certain heuristics and rules to guide our actions. So mindfully, mindfully dealing with our thoughts is really a process of having a thought. But then observing that thought, and considering whether the thought is accurate, is it really true or not. And so mindfulness builds our capacity to have greater awareness of those thoughts. And the way we build that capacity is through mindfulness exercises. And these exercises usually have us pay attention to a particular anchor. So we concentrate our minds on an anchor. Often, that's the breath because it's a very easy one, it's always readily available to us. Anywhere we go, we have our breath, and we can always pay attention to our breath. So that's one. It's one of the most common anchors used in meditation exercises. And by anchoring our thoughts to our breath, we now have an opportunity to begin to notice when our mind wanders off, and what it wanders off to. And when we notice what it's wandered off to, we begin to notice what those thoughts are. And then we can move our mind back to our breath. So the practice is really not allowing the mind to wander. But when the mind wanders, we notice, we notice what we're thinking about. And we're also able to bring our mind back to what we want it to be, which is on the anchor, that this practice allows us to become more cognizant of when our minds are wandering, and more able to redirect our thoughts to something that we want to direct them to. So that's what the whole practice is about, and how it helps us. And it also helps us to create more awareness about our thoughts. Because we first are starting with an anchor, become aware of those

thoughts, we can kind of observe them. And then we can if we want to redirect them or redirect them, ourselves back to our anchor.

**Tierney King 13:05**

Stuart explains how Rick Hansen's book Resilient uses the phrase of "letting be" when referring to mindfulness, where it gives us the opportunity to let in or let go.

**Stuart Haines 13:17**

So, let be is really about what mindfulness practices. We are just observing. We are letting what's happening in the environment, what's happening in our body, what's happening in our mind, let it be and just be an observer of it. So we can take in our sensory input and our emotions and let them be once we are aware of those, once we have a sense of those we can either let them in and letting certain things in is good, if they're positive. If there's something that we want, like savoring something or gratitude, we're learning something, those are all positive thoughts, those are all positive sensory inputs. But there are some things that are happening that we can let go. So we can let go of anger, we can let go of outrage, we can let go of self-doubt if we become aware of it, and we pay attention to it. And we acknowledge that it exists. But we begin to acknowledge that there may be other possible ways of thinking about things. Well, there are many mindfulness practices or activities that one can engage in to build your mindfulness muscle. Meditation is the most ancient, it's the one that's been practiced for millennia, and it's the one that's best studied in academic research. So these meditative practices many of you are familiar with. Many of you may practice these regularly. These meditative practices often involve either sitting and paying attention to your breath, or sitting and doing a body scan. And these are often guided meditations, at least for beginners. If someone guides you through what to do, what to pay attention to, and with time as you get practiced, you no longer need the guide. So people who are very accomplished meditators, often don't use guides any longer. They know what they need to do as the process and what they need to pay attention to and what order. So these are the most common. And you can, you know, learn to do these kinds of sitting or breathing and body scan meditations by downloading an app like Headspace or the Insight Timer or Calm, and there's many others that are out there. In fact, we've recorded a few meditations that you could use as well. Another kind of meditation that is more commonly used in the health professions as a way of building compassion towards other is a loving kindness meditation. And this has actually been documented to improve our ability to be in display empathy, to have empathy for others and compassion towards others. And it helps to prevent burnout for those that are in professions where you're constantly having to essentially help and assist others and be compassionate and empathetic towards them. And it's often difficult sometimes, to continue to have that emotional strength to do that. But with loving kindness meditations, we can begin to extend these feelings and re engage with these feelings on a regular basis. So there are a number of other mindfulness practices that one can engage in. And for those who find it difficult to sit for long periods of time, or even for a short period of time, and just pay attention to your breath or scanning your body, there are other ways of engaging in meditation, like a walking meditation, or just being more mindful when you're doing regular activities. So walking meditation is can be done while you're doing a walk. In it, you have to pay close attention to your bodily sensations, your feet touching the ground, the way your legs feel, the way your arms are swinging the sensations in your body, and also what's happening in the environment. So this is more of a movement meditation. And that can be very good for those who have, as I said, begin to feel antsy, if they're just sitting in a spot and their thoughts are

racing and they cannot come back to the anchor. So you're anchored in this case, by the sensations in your body from walking, as well as anchored by the sensations that are going on in the environment. We have posted on the [wellbeingelixir.org](https://wellbeingelixir.org) website and if you become a member, you'll have access to these a number of meditations that you might find helpful. This particular one is about growing compassion, but there's a body scan meditation and other meditations that will about 10 to 15 minutes in length that you might find very helpful to begin your meditative practice if you've not engaged in meditation before. So we encourage you to join the [wellbeingelixir.org](https://wellbeingelixir.org) community so that you have access to this, it's free. One of the books that I like to highlight during this presentation is *Real Happiness* by Sharon Salzberg. She's one of the pioneers in this area, bounding one of the meditation centers in the Berkshires of Massachusetts and in the 1970s and has written several books about meditation practice. I think this is the one that's the easiest and most accessible to beginners, which is *Real Happiness: The power of meditation is a 28-day program*. Basically, there are four different meditations she guides you through one for each week. One of them being the walking meditation.

**Tierney King 18:51**

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