

# Lessons in Mindfulness: How to Optimize Your Attention

**“Attention is psychic energy, and like physical energy, unless we allocate some part of it to the task at hand, no work gets done.” ~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**

Whether you are self-employed, employed or unemployed, you will often find you need to focus your complete attention on the task at hand to do it well. By focusing your complete attention, you are able to accomplish more, much better and faster.

However, given the distractions and challenges prevalent in our fast-paced world today, it is becoming increasingly difficult to focus our full attention on the things that matter most in our lives.

As writers and web content publishers, for example, the challenge of earning a living from our writing or publishing is growing. More web writers and bloggers today are producing content hurriedly in a bid to get their voices heard above everybody else's voice online screaming: "Read me! Read me!" "Buy me! Buy me!" "Follow me! Follow me!"

Anxiety, stress, depression and other emotional problems are taking a toll on people, even as cases of rejection increase and become common place among writers. What are we to do to with all these issues? One thing is clear, mindfulness is today more important than ever before.

## **What is mindfulness and why do you need it?**

The essence of mindfulness is paying attention and staying aware of the world around you. It is about focusing your attention on your immediate surroundings, responsibilities and experiences and responding to them with an objective, compassionate and non-judgmental attitude. Different from meditation techniques where you mainly focus inwards to understand and find the center of yourself, mindfulness has you focusing outwards to understand the world around you and your place in it.

To be mindful, you need to pay full attention and not let anything slide by. You need to focus with all of your senses and draw from the stillness, the peace, the consciousness inside you that is independent of all the pains and joys of external realities. You need to know life is a journey full of ups and downs—there are rainy days and there are sunny days. Mindfulness helps you respond to all of life's experiences with calmness, acceptance and hope, even when those experiences are difficult and painful.

## Top tips for optimal attention and mindfulness



Maria Konnikova in her New York Times bestselling book *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes* argues that, not unlike willpower and habit loops, attention is analogous to a muscle that can get strained, but can also be bolstered with training and purposeful repeat use.

Holmes himself says: “I consider that a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose.” He cautions tread carefully and mind how you use your brain. In other words, be aware and selective about your attention. Here are some tips to help you optimize your attention and practice mindfulness as a writer.

### **1. Find a quiet place to work.**

Whether it is a dedicated home office, a corner of the library or a shade in the park, find a quiet, comfortably and distraction-free place to write. Dis-attach from your thoughts and logical worries and concentrate on the task at hand. This sharpens focus and helps you produce your best work.

### **2. Stick to a regular work routine.**

There is power in routines. When you set and take time (usually up to three weeks) to establish a consistent work pattern or routine, the force of habit kicks in and your brain begins to automatically get into work mode in your designated work hours. Find out what time of day you are at the height of your brain power and creativity (for morning people it's usually before noon), and set that time for writing. If you're a night owl, set evenings for writing. Establishing a consistent work routine helps you get "into the groove," beat procrastination and focus your attention better.

### **3. Dress the part.**

Many home workers take pride in being able to work in their pajamas and robe all day, but wearing a business shirt or skirt beforehand is a powerful way to psychologically prepare your mind for work. Dress as you would for a real job (perhaps a casual

one) before you sit at your desk to work. This puts you in the right mindset and sends a warning to anyone who might think of interrupting you during work hours that you are serious about your work. It also boosts concentration and shows professionalism.

#### **4. Take short breaks in between work.**

The brain can only give full attention for so long. If you force yourself to work for twelve hours straight, you will strain and fatigue your brain. Consequently, you will lose attention and make mistakes you otherwise would have easily avoided.

Understand your optimum attention span. If your optimal attention span for writing is half an hour, take a five minutes break after each 30 minutes writing period. Shower, walk or do anything else other than writing during your break. When you get back to your desk, your mind will be refreshed and you will be ready for another intensive writing spell.

#### **5. Read widely and often.**

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. Apart from helping you expand your vocabulary and teaching you more about the world we live in, reading widely and often strengthens brain connections and improves your concentration capabilities. When you are reading, you sit silently and still so you can focus on the story. Do this regularly and you develop the ability to sit silently and quietly for long periods to do what needs to be done. Besides, it's fun and enjoyable to read and learn new things from books!

#### **6. Quit chasing compliments.**

Complements, awards and praise are nice—everybody enjoys them. It feels nice to hear someone tell you they like your writing and you are really talented. However, a desperate need for praise beats the purpose of writing. It shifts attention from the writing itself to the need for approval. You lose sight of your duty to educate, inform and entertain and start living for people's acceptance. Quit chasing praise and accolades and focus on doing your job the best way possible. The praise will come on its own. Lecrae warns if you live for people's acceptance, you will die from their rejection.

#### **7. Watch what you eat.**

What you eat affects your mind. For example, high levels of sugar and fat can make it difficult for your mind to process information and leave you sluggish and easily distracted. When your mind is sluggish and easily distracted, it becomes near impossible to focus and do anything productive. Eat right to keep healthy and improve your attention. Low fat versions of your normal meals, sugar free snacks and fresh fruits are highly recommended. Avoid fat and sugar intake whenever possible, even if you're not diabetic.

## **8. Drink more water.**

Many of us love our cup of coffee and there is nothing wrong with that. Coffee is good, but water is better. Drinking water keeps you hydrated and your brain needs that hydration to work optimally. According to a 2012 study published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, mild dehydration (so subtle that you don't really feel it) can lead to inattention. Keep a bottle of water at your desk to sip as you work. If the thought of plain water doesn't appeal to you, try some of the low calories, low sugar flavored waters on the market. Low sugar juices are also okay for keeping yourself hydrated.

## **9. Do puzzles in your free time.**

Sometimes we easily lose attention and awareness because we don't use our minds enough. A way to ensure you keep your mind sharp and engaged is to do puzzles in your free time. Instead of spending the whole afternoon in front of your television set, spend that time working puzzles. Puzzles are fun, relaxing and enhance your ability to solve problems and think critically "outside of the box." Common puzzles you can use are the word searches, crosswords and sudoku found in newspapers and magazines.

## **10. Get out with people.**

Writers love to work in solitude away from the distractions of others, but it is good for your mental and physical well-being to go out with people from time to time. Human beings are social creatures and too much isolation can drive you mad. Go out occasionally for a movie, party or other social activity with friends and/or family. Talk to people during your breaks when you are working in the coffee shop. Just think of ways to interact with others and find out what's going on in their lives. This will broaden your world view and ensure life in this big, beautiful world doesn't pass you by.

## **11. Count your blessings.**

One of the worst things you can do to yourself is not recognize and appreciate all the good things you have going on in your own life. Comparing yourself to others and being jealous of their successes only creates bitterness and resentment, which serves to distract and derail you from your core goals. Stop comparing and complaining and start paying attention to all the incredible things in your life. As Oprah Winfrey says, "Be thankful for what you have; you'll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don't have, you will never, ever have enough."

**Remember:** A calm and grateful mind is a fertile and mindful mind. Keep calm and write on!

**See also:** [Three Ways to Keep Yourself Accountable](#)