

Probing Question: What is mindfulness?

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Ancient wisdom tells us to "stop and smell the roses" and to "live for the moment." Given our busy lives, it's no surprise that this advice is often easier said than done. Many of us multitask not only our physical chores, but our mental ones as well.

Says Douglas Coatsworth, Penn State associate professor of human development and family studies, this type of mental [multitasking](#) can distract our attention from some of the most important things in life.

Most of us have driven somewhere in an automobile while so deep in thought that we barely remember the journey, notes Coatsworth. This is a good [metaphor](#) for the effect of mental distractedness on the journey of life, including our relationships with those closest to us, he explains.

"We think that being mindful -- which simply means bringing your attention to what's happening in the [present moment](#) -- can have a profound, positive impact on [interpersonal relationships](#)," says Coatsworth, whose research focuses on the effects of [mindfulness](#) on relationships between spouses, between parents and their children, and between

teachers and the children in their classes.

"We've all had these moments in relationships when you just were not heard, when the other person's attention was somewhere else," he says. "And it feels bad. It feels like you're insignificant at that moment. In our work at Penn State's Prevention Research Center, we are trying to bring mindfulness into these everyday interactions as a way of helping people to be truly present and, therefore, to enhance the quality of their relationships."

Coatsworth says that meditation is the most commonly known way of becoming mindful, and he encourages people to engage in it. "Essentially, meditation is a way of practicing bringing your attention to the present moment," he says. "There is some [very good scientific evidence](#) that meditation can reduce people's suffering and reduce stress and the physical manifestations of that stress, such as psoriasis or anxiety."

Although Coatsworth himself spends about 40 minutes a day meditating, he says that meditating for just a few minutes a day or using other kinds of contemplative practices can bring significant benefits to relationships, especially when performed during transitions in daily life, such as just before going into the office in the morning or into the house after work.

Besides formal meditation practice, other informal techniques also can help people focus on what's happening in the present moment. For example, Coatsworth says people can learn to become aware of less intense emotional states and take actions to prevent the escalation to more intense states.

"Imagine that you're seeing a situation with your kids unfold and you're beginning to feel that knot form in your stomach or that tension building in your shoulders," he says. "You know you are about to explode. What can you do at that lower level of emotion to help you avoid overreacting?"

One thing you can do, Coatsworth explains, is take several deep breaths and try to focus on those breaths. This practice, he says, has a natural calming effect.

Another thing you can do, he adds, is look at a situation in a nonjudgmental and compassionate way. He calls this practice using the beginner's mind, or seeing things as if for the first time in order to avoid getting caught in an automatic cycle of reacting.

"Our emotional world often overrides our ability to think about options and to respond appropriately," says Coatsworth. "It floods us in a way that doesn't allow us to parent or teach or interact with intention in the present moment. We in the Prevention Research Center believe that if parents, teachers, or couples practice some general mindfulness skills, the likelihood of these escalating cycles of negativity happening will be reduced and their relationships will be more positive, loving, and compassionate." To that end, Coatsworth and colleagues Tish Jennings and Mark Greenberg have established the Program on Empathy, Awareness, and Compassion in Education or PEACE, a program that build mindfulness skills and practices for children, parents and teachers.

With so many of us juggling busy work and personal lives, slowing and calming our thoughts and reactions is not a cinch, concedes Coatsworth, but the rewards are well worth it. As 17th century poet Robert Herrick advised, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," -- and after you gather them, don't forget to stop and smell them too.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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