



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 6,5 (11/2012)

Foundations of Mindfulness

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Excerpted from *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom* by Rick Hanson, PhD (with Rick Mendius, MD), © 2009.

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(Please see the book itself for the references.)

*The education of attention would be
an education par excellence.*

—William James

We hear the word “mindful” more and more these days, but what does it actually mean? Being mindful simply means having good control over your attention: you can place your attention wherever you want and it stays there; when you want to shift it to something else, you can.

When your attention is steady, so is your mind: not rattled or hijacked by whatever pops into awareness, but stably present, grounded, and unshakeable. Attention is like a spotlight, and what it illuminates streams into your mind and shapes your brain. Consequently,

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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Rick Hanson, PhD, edits the Bulletin. [Michelle Keane](#) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by [Laurel Hanson](#).

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developing greater control over your attention is perhaps the single most powerful way to reshape your brain and thus your mind.

You can train and strengthen your attention just like any other mental ability (Jha, Krompinger, and Baime 2007; Tang et al. 2007); this chapter and the next one will show you many ways to do this. Let's start by exploring *how* your brain pays attention.

Your Mindful Brain

To help an animal survive—especially a complicated animal like us—the brain manages the flow of attention by balancing three needs: keeping information in mind, changing the contents of awareness, and finding the right amount of stimulation.

Holding Onto Information

The brain must be able to keep important information in the foreground of awareness – such as a suspicious movement in the grass of the African savannah 100,000 years ago, or a phone number you just heard. My dissertation advisor, Bernard Baars (1997), developed the influential theory of a *global workspace of consciousness*— or in plainer terms, the mental chalkboard. Whatever you call it, it's a space that holds incoming information, old information retrieved from memory, and mental operations on both.

Updating Awareness

Second, your brain must routinely update this chalkboard with new information, whether it comes from the environment or from your own mind. For example, suppose you glimpse a familiar face across a crowded room but you just can't place it. When you finally recall the woman's name – Jane Smith, a friend of a friend – you update the image of her face with that information.

Seeking Stimulation

Third, your brain has a built-in desire for stimulation that likely evolved to prod our

ancestors to keep seeking food, mates, and other resources. This need is so deep that in a sensory deprivation chamber (in which a person floats on warm salt water in a completely dark and silent space), the brain will sometimes start to hallucinate imagery just to have new information to process (Lilly 2006).

A Neural Balancing Act

Your brain continually juggles these three aspects of attention. Let's see how this works.

When you hold something in mind, such as a presentation at work or the sensations of breathing, the cortical regions that support working memory (a key component of the mental chalkboard) are relatively stable. To keep them this way, a kind of gate protects working memory from all of the other information coursing through the brain. When the gate is closed, you stay focused on one thing. When a new stimulus comes knocking - perhaps a startling thought, or the sound of a bird - the gate pops open, allowing new information in to update working memory. Then the gate closes behind it, keeping out other information. (Of course, it's actually more complicated than this; see Buschman and Miller 2007; Dehaene, Sergent, and Changeux 2003.)

As long as the contents of working memory are moderately stimulating, a steady stream



of dopamine is produced, which keeps the gate closed. If the stimulation decreases significantly, the pulsing of dopamine-releasing neurons slows down, allowing the gate to open and new information to surge in. On the other hand, a spike in the rate of dopamine release - due to new opportunities or threats - will open the gate as well (Braver, Barch, and Cohen 2002; Cohen, Aston-Jones, and Gilzenrat 2005; O'Reilly 2006).

It's an ingeniously simple system that produces complex results. To use an example adapted from Todd Braver and Jonathan Cohen (2000), consider a monkey munching bananas in a tree. Steady eating maintains stable dopamine levels and keeps his focus on *this* tree. But when the bananas start to run out, rewards and thus dopamine levels drop, and thoughts about food in *that* tree now push into working memory. Or, if a friendly monkey swings onto a nearby branch, dopamine spikes from this fresh stimulus also pop open the gate to awareness.

This dopamine-driven system interacts with another neural system—based in the basal ganglia—that tries to balance the rewards of stimulation-seeking (new food! new mates!) with its risks (exposure to predators, rivals, and other hazards). The basal ganglia are a kind of “stimostat” that registers the stimulation coming through the senses or from within the mind itself. As long as the amount of stimulation remains above a certain threshold, there's no need to trigger stimulation-seeking. But when stimulation drops below this threshold, the basal ganglia signal your brain to get more *now* - and you find yourself being provocative in a boring conversation or lost in thought while meditating.

Neurological Diversity

People vary a lot in their tendencies with regard to holding onto information, updating awareness, and seeking stimulation (see the following table). For example, the normal range of temperament includes both those who like a lot of novelty and excitement, and those who prefer predictability and quiet. People at the high or low end of this range often face challenges, especially in modern settings that require sustained attention to things that may not be that interesting (e.g., in schools or corporate offices). For instance, someone whose awareness is very easily updated - whose gate to working memory is propped wide open - has a hard time screening out irrelevant and distracting stimuli.

Whatever your innate inclinations may be, your attention is also influenced by your life experiences and culture. For example, contemporary Western culture strains and sometimes overwhelms the brain with more information than it evolved to handle on a routine basis. Our culture also habituates the brain to a hyper-rich stream of stimulation - consider video games and shopping malls - so that a drop in this stream can feel dull and boring. Essentially, modern life takes the jumpy, distractible “monkey mind” we all started with and feeds it steroids. Against this backdrop, other factors - such as motivation, fatigue, low blood sugar, illness, anxiety, or depression - can also affect your attention.

The Results of Different Tendencies in the Three Aspects of Attention

Tendency Regarding Aspect of Attention	Aspect of Attention, and Its Results		
	Holding onto Information	Updating Awareness	Seeking Stimulation
High	Obsessiveness “Over-focusing”	Porous filters Distractibility Sensory overload	Hyperactivity Thrill-seeking
Moderate	Good concentration Ability to divide attention	Mental flexibility Assimilation Accommodation	Enthusiasm Adaptability
Low	Concentration fatigue Small working memory	Fixed views Obliviousness Flat learning curve	Stuckness Apathy Lethargy

What’s Your Personal Profile?

Each of us has a personal profile of attentional capacities, shaped by temperament, life experiences, cultural influences, and other factors. Taken as a whole, what are the strengths and weaknesses of your attention? What would you like to improve?

One pitfall is ignoring this profile - or worse, being ashamed of it - and then trying to fit your personal square peg into the generic round hole. Another pitfall is never challenging your tendencies. Between these is a middle way in which you both adapt your work, family situation, and spiritual practices to your own nature, and you develop better control of your attention over time.

Individualize Your Approach

To use contemplative practice as an example, many traditional methods were developed in times and cultures that had relatively low stimulation levels. But what about people today who are used to much more stimulation, particularly those at the spirited end of the normal range of temperament? I've seen people like this give up on meditation because they just couldn't find a way to do it that would fit with their own brain.

In terms of its innate effects - distinct from how others react to a person - *neurological diversity* is much more significant than variations of gender, race, or sexual orientation. If contemplative traditions are to increase the diversity of their practitioners, they need to find more ways to welcome diverse kinds of brains. Further, here in the West, we particularly need to individualize contemplative practices because there is a premium - in busy, "householder" lives - on methods that are targeted, efficient, and effective.

Whether you want to be more focused at work, while talking with your partner, or during meditation, give yourself permission to adapt your approach to your own nature. Be compassionate about your personal challenges to mindfulness: they are not your fault, and the positive emotion of compassion could increase dopamine levels and help steady your mind.



The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute>.

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Next, consider which of the three aspects of attention is most challenging for you: holding something in awareness, filtering out distractions, or managing the desire for stimulation. For example: Do you get tired quickly when you try to concentrate? Do you seem to have porous filters, so that you get distracted by many of

the sights and sounds around you? Or are you the sort of person who needs a rich diet of stimulation? (Or some combination of these?)

For the rest of this chapter, we'll explore general-purpose methods for gaining greater control over your attention. Then, in the next chapter, we'll use the preeminent training in mindfulness – meditation – to improve your personal profile of attention abilities.

Set Intentions

Use the power of your prefrontal cortex to set intentions to be more mindful:

- Establish a deliberate intention at the beginning of any activity that requires focus. Use statements such as *May my mind be steady*. Or just call up a silent feeling of determination.
- Get a bodily sense of being someone you know who is extremely focused. That uses the empathy systems in the brain to simulate within yourself the mindful nature of that other person.
- Keep reestablishing your intentions. For example, if you're in a meeting, every few minutes you could resolve anew to stay focused. One of my friends uses a little device

that can be set to vibrate at different intervals; he leaves it in his pocket and gets a discrete wake-up call every ten minutes.

- Make the intention to be attentive the default setting of your life by developing the habit of everyday mindfulness.

Supports for Everyday Mindfulness

- Slow down.
- Talk less.
- When you can, do just one thing at a time. Reduce multitasking.
- Focus on your breath while doing daily activities.
- Relax into a feeling of calm presence with other people.
- Use routine events - such as the phone ringing, going to the bathroom, or drinking water - as “temple bells” to return you to a sense of centeredness.

• At meals, take a moment to reflect on where your food came from. For example, if you were focusing on the wheat in a slice of bread, you could imagine it growing in the fields and being harvested, threshed, stored, ground into flour, baked into loaves, and shipped to a market, all before arriving on your plate. You can go pretty far with this in just a few seconds. You might also imagine some of the people who helped turn this wheat into your bread, and the equipment and technology involved, as well as our ancient ancestors who slowly figured out how to domesticate wild grains.

- simplify your life; give up lesser pleasures for greater ones.



Stay Awake and Alert

The brain can't be fully attentive unless it's fully awake. Unfortunately, the average person is sleep-deprived, getting about an hour less sleep a day than the body really needs. Try to get enough sleep ("enough" depends on your nature and factors such as fatigue, illness, thyroid problems, or depression). In other words, take care of yourself. Struggling to pay attention when you're tired is like spurring an exhausted horse to keep running uphill.

Presuming you're reasonably rested, several additional factors can increase your alertness:

- Sitting in an erect posture provides internal feedback to the *reticular formation* - a mesh-like network of nerves in the brain stem which is involved with wakefulness and consciousness - telling it that you need to stay vigilant and alert. This is a neurological reason behind a schoolteacher's demands to "sit up straight, class!" as well as the classic meditation instruction to sit upright in a dignified way.
- "Brighten the mind" is a traditional phrase used to describe infusing your awareness with energy and clarity. In fact, to overcome drowsiness, it's sometimes suggested that you literally visualize light. Neurologically, this "brightening" likely involves a surge of norepinephrine throughout the brain; that neurotransmitter - also triggered by the stress-response cascade - is a general orienting signal that fosters alertness.
- Oxygen is to the nervous system what gasoline is to your car. Although just 2 percent of body weight, your brain uses roughly 20 percent of your oxygen. By taking several deep breaths, you increase oxygen saturation in your blood and thus rev up your brain.

Quiet the Mind

When the mind is quiet, fewer things bubble up to distract you and it's easier to remain mindful. In chapter 5 we explored ways to "cool the fires"; these help quiet the mind through relaxing the body and calming emotions and desires. The methods here focus on stilling the clamor of verbal thought - that endlessly nattering voice in the back of the head.

Be Aware of the Body as a Whole

Some parts of the brain are linked by *reciprocal inhibition*: when one part activates, it suppresses another one. To some extent, the left and right hemispheres have this relationship; thus, when you stimulate the right hemisphere by engaging the activities it specializes in, the verbal centers of the left hemisphere are effectively shushed.

The right, visual-spatial hemisphere has the greater responsibility for representing the state of your body, so awareness of the body can help suppress left-brain verbal chatter. Right hemisphere activation increases further when you sense the body as a *whole*, which draws upon the global, gestalt processing of that hemisphere.

To practice awareness of the whole body, start with the breath as a whole; rather than allow attention to move as it normally does, from sensation to sensation, try to experience your breath as a single, unified gestalt of sensations in your belly, chest, throat, and nose. It's normal for this unified gestalt sensing to crumble after a second or two; when it does, just try to recreate it. Then expand awareness to include the body as a whole, sensed as a single perception, as one whole thing. This sense of the body as a whole will also tend to crumble quickly, especially in the beginning; when it does, simply restore it again, if only for a few



seconds. You'll get better at this with practice, and will even be able to do this in the middle of everyday settings such as meetings.

Besides its benefits for quieting the verbal mind, whole body awareness supports *singleness of mind*. This is a meditative state in which all aspects of experience come together as a whole and attention is very steady. As we'll see in the next chapter, this is one of the factors of deep contemplative absorption.

Hush the Verbal Centers

Send a gentle instruction to the verbal centers, something along the lines of *Hush, now, it's time to relax and be quiet. There's nothing important to talk about right now. You'll have plenty of time to talk later, throughout the rest of the day.* In doing so, you use the power of prefrontal intention to bias verbal activity toward relative quiet. When (not if, alas) the voices in the head start muttering again, repeat the instruction to them. For example: *It's not time for chatter, your yammering is a burden on me, you can talk after this meeting/ tax return/ golf putt.* Alternately, you might occupy your brain's language centers with other verbal activities, such as repeating a favorite saying, mantra, or prayer in the back of your mind.

If you like, make an appointment with yourself to let your mind really yammer after you're done with the activity you're staying focused on. Be sure to keep this appointment - it's weirdly fun and definitely interesting to amp up the verbal stream in your mind; it helps you see how arbitrary and meaningless most of it is.

Abide as Awareness Itself

As mindfulness stabilizes, you will rest more and more as awareness itself. Awareness contains *mind-objects*, a general term for any mental content, including perceptions, thoughts, desires, memories, emotions, and so on. Although mind-objects may dance busily with each other, awareness itself is never disturbed. Awareness is a kind of screen on which mind-objects register, like - in the Zen saying - the reflections on a pond of geese flying overhead. But awareness is never sullied or rattled by the passing show.

In your brain, the neural patterns represented within awareness are highly variable, but the

representational capacities themselves - the basis of the subjective experience of awareness - are generally very stable. Consequently, resting as awareness brings a beautiful sense of inner clarity and peace. These feelings are generally deepest in meditation, but you can cultivate a greater sense of abiding as awareness throughout the day. Use the following guided reflection to help you do just that.

Resting in Awareness

Relax, with your eyes open or closed. Settle into just being here, a peaceful body breathing. Observe the sensations of your breath coming and going. Establish a clear sense of observing as distinct from that which is observed.

Observe the flow of mind-objects without getting drawn into them; don't chase mental carrots or struggle with sticks. Have thoughts and so on, but don't be them: don't identify with the contents of awareness.

Watch the movie without stepping into the screen.

Allow experiences to come and go without attempting to influence them. Likes and dislikes may arise regarding mind-objects; accept these preferences as just more mind-objects. See that all mind-objects have the same nature: they come and they go.

Settle into the present moment. Drop the past and let go of the future. Receive each moment without trying to connect one moment to the next. Abide as presence, neither remembering nor planning. There is no straining, no seeking for anything. Nothing to have, nothing to do, nothing to be.

Notice the gaps between mind-objects, a palpable way to discern the field of awareness distinct from its contents. For example, deliberately think a specific thought, such as "there is breathing," and then observe what is present immediately before and after the thought. See that there is a kind of peaceful readiness, an unused capacity, a fertile vacancy.

Notice the spacelike qualities of awareness: it is boundless, still and silent, empty until something appears, vast enough to hold anything, always present and reliable, and never altered by the mind-objects passing through it like shooting stars. But do not mistake any concept of awareness - which is just another mind-object - for awareness itself. Keep returning to simply being, simply present, opening out to the infinite, without boundaries.

Gently explore other qualities of awareness; stay with your direct experience instead of conceptualizing about awareness. Is there a kind of luminosity to it? Does awareness have a subtle compassion? Are mind-objects simply modifications of awareness itself?

Compassion and Joy *from Christian and Buddhist Perspectives*

A Benefit Workshop for the Wellspring Institute Sunday, January 13, 2013

Andrew Dreitcer, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Claremont School of Theology, and James Baraz, co-founder of [Spirit Rock Meditation Center](#) and author of [Awakening Joy](#), will co-lead a four hour workshop – [Compassion and Joy from Christian and Buddhist Perspectives](#) - to benefit the [Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#) on Sunday, January 13, 2013.

Hosted by [Rick Hanson, Ph.D.](#), the workshop will include presentations, discussion, and internal experiential practices. Topics include: opening the heart without getting drained; how happiness and other positive emotions increase resilience, health, and love; connecting personal spirituality with worldly action; and how these perspectives and practices involve the brain.

It's happening on Sunday, January 13, 2013 from 9:30 am – 1:30 pm at the Marin Showcase Theatre, 10 Avenue of the Flags, San Rafael, CA 94903. Registration is \$50 and tickets will be available via the Marin Civic Center box office.

For more information and to register for notification when tickets go on sale, go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/compassion-and-joy-workshop>.

Compassion and Assertion

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*If we could read the secret history of our enemies,
we should find in each [person's] life sorrow
and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I sat on the board of a meditation center for nine years, and was often struck by how its teachers expressed their views. They were compassionate about the concerns of others, but when they said what they thought, they did so clearly and often strongly, without hemming or hawing. And then they let it be, not becoming defensive or argumentative. This combination of openheartedness and directness was very powerful. It got the job done while nurturing the love in the room.

This was compassion and assertion working together. They're the two wings that get any relationship off the ground and keep it flying. They support each other: compassion brings caring to assertion, while assertion helps you feel comfortable giving compassion since you know your own needs will be met. Compassion widens the circle of "us" while assertion protects and supports everyone inside it. They both nourish the wolf of love. In this chapter, we'll explore brain-savvy ways to use and strengthen your inborn abilities to be compassionate and assertive, and we'll begin with compassion.

In order to be truly compassionate, you must first feel something of what the other person is going through. You must have empathy, which cuts through the automatic tendencies of the brain that create an “us” and a “them.” So that’s where we’ll start.

Empathy

Empathy is the foundation of any meaningful relationship. When someone empathizes with you, it gives you the sense that your inner being truly exists for that person - that you are a Thou to his I, with feelings and needs that have standing. Empathy reassures you that he understands your inner workings at least somewhat, particularly your intentions and emotions. We are social animals, who, as Dan Siegel puts it, need to feel *felt* (2007).

Or let’s say you are the one who is offering empathy. Empathy is respectful and soothing, and it usually evokes goodwill in return. Often empathy is all the other person is asking of you; if there is still something the person needs to talk about, you can address it in a more positive atmosphere. Further, being empathic gives you lots of useful information about the other person, including what’s really on her mind, and what she really cares about.



For example, if she's being critical of you, sense down into her deeper wants, particularly the softer and younger ones. Then you'll have a fuller picture, which will probably reduce any frustration or anger toward her. She'll likely sense this shift in you, and become more understanding herself.

To be clear: empathy is neither agreement nor approval. You can empathize with someone you wish would act differently. Empathy *doesn't* mean waiving your rights; knowing this can help you feel it's alright to be empathic.

In spiritual practice, empathy sees how we are all related to each other. It is mindful and curious, with a "don't know" quality that prevents you from getting stuck in your own views. Empathy is virtue in action, the restraint of reactive patterns in order to stay present with another person. It embodies non-harming, since a lack of empathy is often upsetting to others, and also opens the door to hurting them unwittingly. Empathy contains an inherent generosity: you give the willingness to be moved by another person.

Empathic Breakdowns

For all its benefits, empathy disappears quickly during most conflicts, and fades away slowly in many long-term relationships. Unfortunately, inadequate empathy erodes trust and makes it harder to solve interpersonal problems. Just recall a time you felt misunderstood - or worse, a time when the other person didn't even want to understand you. A history of empathic breakdowns has effects; the more vulnerable a person is and the higher the stakes, the greater the impact. For example, insufficient caregiver empathy often leads to insecure attachment in a young child. In the larger world, empathic breakdowns lead to exploitation, prejudice, and terrible atrocities. There's no empathy in the wolf of hate.

How to Be Empathic

Your natural capacity for empathy can be brought forth deliberately, used skillfully, and strengthened. Here's how to work with the brain's empathy circuits.

Set the Stage

Bring conscious intention to being empathic. For example, when I realize that my wife

wants to have one of *those* conversations – she’s not happy about something, and it’s probably me – I try to take a few seconds to remind myself to be empathic and not lame, and that it feels good to be empathic. These little steps activate the prefrontal cortex (PFC) to orient you to the situation, focus your intentions, and prime empathy-related neural networks; they also warm up the limbic system to get your brain headed toward the rewards of empathy.

Next, relax your body and mind, and open to the other person as much as feels right to you.

Use the methods in the next section to feel safe and strong enough to receive the other person fully. Remind yourself that whatever is in his mind is over *there*, and you’re over *here*, present with but separate from the stream of his thoughts and feelings.

Keep paying attention to the other person; be *with* him. This sort of sustained attention is uncommon, and other people appreciate it a lot. Appoint a little guardian in your mind that keeps watching the continuity of your attentiveness; this will stimulate the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which pays attention to attention. In a way, empathy is a kind of mindfulness meditation focused on someone else’s inner world.



Notice the Actions of Others

Notice the other person's movements, stance, gestures, and actions. (The point is to energize the perceptual-motor mirroring functions of your brain, not to analyze her body language.) Imagine doing these yourself. What would it feel like, in your own body, to do them? If it's appropriate, match some of her movements unobtrusively with your own, and notice what this feels like.

Sense the Feelings of Others

Tune in to yourself. Sense your breathing, body, and emotions. As we've seen, this stimulates your insula and primes it to sense the inner feelings of others.

Watch the other person's face and eyes closely. Our core emotions are expressed through universal facial expressions (Ekman 2007). They often flit by quickly, but if you're mindful, you can spot them. This is the biological basis for the old saying that the eyes are the windows to the soul.

Relax. Let your body open to resonating with the other person's emotions.



Track the Thoughts of Others

Actively imagine what the other person could be thinking and wanting. Imagine what could be going on beneath the surface, and what might be pulling in different directions inside him. Consider what you know or can reasonably guess about him, such as his personal history, childhood, temperament, personality, “hot buttons,” recent events in his life, and the nature of his relationship with you: What effect might these have? Also take into account what you’ve already experienced from tuning in to his actions and emotions. Ask yourself questions, such as *What might he be feeling deep down? What could be most important to him? What might he want from me?* Be respectful, and don’t jump to conclusions: stay in “don’t know” mind.

Check Back

As appropriate, check with the other person to see if you’re on the right track. For example, you might say, “Sounds like you’re feeling ____, is that right?” Or, “I’m not sure, but I get the sense that ____.” Or, “It seems like what bothered you was _____. Did you want _____?” Be careful not to ask questions in an argumentative or prosecutorial way to advance your own viewpoint. And don’t muddle empathy together with any disagreements you may have. Keep empathy separate from asserting yourself, and try to be clear about the transition from one to the other. For example, you might say something like,

“I get that you wanted more attention from me when we visited my relatives, and that you felt bad. It makes sense to me and I’m sorry. I’m going to be more careful about that in the future. [Pause.] But, you know, you seemed happy chatting away with Aunt Sue and didn’t tell me that you wanted more attention. If you could tell me directly what you’d like in the moment, it would be easier for me to give it to you - which is what I definitely want to do.”

Receive Empathy Itself

When you would like to receive empathy, remember that you’re more likely to get it if you are “feelable.” Be open, present, and honest. You could also ask for empathy directly; remember that some people may just not realize that receiving empathy is important to you (and to lots of others, too). Be willing to say explicitly what you would like to receive. It often helps to make it clear that it’s empathy you want, not necessarily agreement or approval. When you sense that the other person gets how it is for you, at least in some ways, let the experience of receiving empathy sink into your implicit, emotional memory.

Feeling Comfortable with Closeness

Empathy opens you up to other people and naturally draws you closer. So to be as empathic as possible, you need to be comfortable with closeness. But this can be challenging. During our evolutionary history, there were many risks in encounters with others. Additionally, most psychological pain occurs in close relationships - particularly those in early childhood, when memory networks are most easily shaped and emotional reactions are least regulated by the PFC. All in all, it's natural to be wary about getting too close. The methods below can help you feel safer while becoming more deeply connected with other people.

Focus on Your Internal Experience

There appears to be a central network in the middle and lower regions of the brain that evolved to integrate multiple social-emotional capabilities (Siegel 2007). This network is stimulated by important relationships, especially their emotional aspects. Depending somewhat on your temperament (some of us are more affected by relationships than others), you might feel flooded by all the information flowing through this network. To deal with this, focus more on your own experience than on the other person (e.g., track some breaths



in and out, or wiggle your toes and pay attention to the sensations). Notice how you keep going on being, doing just fine even though you are emotionally close. This reduces the sense of threat from closeness and thus the desire to pull back.

Pay Attention to Awareness Itself

Pay attention to awareness itself, distinct from the (potentially intense) sense of the other person contained within awareness; simply notice that you're aware and explore what that's like. Technically, the working memory aspects of awareness appear to be based largely on neural substrates in the *dorsolateral* (upper-outer) portions of the PFC, in contrast to the *ventromedial* (lower-middle) circuitry that processes social-emotional content. By bringing attention to awareness, you're probably energizing those dorsolateral circuits more than their ventromedial neighbors.

Use Imagery

Use imagery, which stimulates the right hemisphere of your brain. For example, if I'm with someone who's getting intense, I might imagine myself as a deeply rooted tree, with the other person's attitudes and emotions blowing through my leaves and shaking them - but winds always come to an end, and my tree remains standing. Or I'll imagine that there is a picket fence between us - or, if need be, a glass wall that's a foot thick. In addition to the benefits that come from the particular images themselves, activating the right hemisphere encourages a sense of the whole that is larger than any part - including that part of your experience which might feel uncomfortable with closeness.

Be Mindful of Your Inner World

Whether you're with others or by yourself, being mindful of your inner world seems to help heal significant shortages of empathy you may have experienced when you were young (Siegel 2007). In essence, mindful attention to your own experience activates many of the same circuits that are stimulated in childhood by the attuned and caring attention of others. Thus, you're giving to yourself here and now what you should have gotten when you were little; over time, this interest and concern will gradually sink in, helping you feel more secure while being close with others.

May You Not Suffer

You can deliberately cultivate compassion, which will stimulate and strengthen its underlying neural substrate, including your ACC and insula (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, et al. 2008). To prime the neural circuits of compassion, bring to mind the feeling of being with someone who loves you, while calling up heartfelt emotions such as gratitude or fondness. Next, bring empathy to the difficulties of the other person. Opening to his (even subtle) suffering, let sympathy and goodwill naturally arise. (These steps flow together in actual practice.)

Then, in your mind, offer explicit wishes, such as *May you not suffer. May you find rest. May*

it go well with the doctor.

Or wordlessly experience compassionate feelings and wishes. You could also focus on universal, nonreferential compassion - compassion which has no particular target - so that, as Tibetan monk Mathieu Ricard says, “benevolence and compassion pervade the mind as a way of being” (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, et al. 2008, e1897).

You can also bring compassion practices into meditation. In the beginning, make your compassionate phrases the object of attention. As the meditation deepens, sink into feeling compassion beyond words,



the sense of it filling your heart and chest and body, becoming increasingly absorbing and intense. You may feel compassion radiating from you in all directions: front and back, left and right, up and down.

However and whenever you experience compassion, be mindful of the experience and really take it in. By remembering what it's like, you'll be more able to return to this lovely state of mind in the future.

Every day, try to have compassion for five kinds of people: someone you're grateful to (a "benefactor"), a loved one or friend, a neutral person, someone who is difficult for you - and yourself. For example, sometimes I'll look at a stranger on the street (a neutral person), get a quick sense of him or her, and then access a sense of compassion. You can also bring compassion to animals and plants, or toward groups of people (e.g., children, those who are ill, Republicans or Democrats). Compassion is for *everyone*.

Even though it can be hard to bring compassion to a difficult person, doing so reinforces the important lesson that we are all one in our suffering. When you see how connected everything is, and the many factors "upstream" that push on every person, compassion naturally arises. The Buddhist image of this is the jewel of compassion resting in the lotus of wisdom - the union of caring and insight.

Asserting Yourself

Being assertive means speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the nitty-gritty of relationships. In my experience, skillful assertiveness is founded on *unilateral virtue* and *effective communication*. Let's see what this actually means, whether interacting with a friend, coworker, lover, or family member.

Unilateral Virtue

Virtue sounds lofty, but it's actually down to earth. It simply means living from your innate goodness, guided by principle. When you are virtuous no matter what other people do, their behavior is not controlling you. As a therapist, I've seen many couples in which each person says essentially the same thing: *I'll treat you well after you treat me well*. They're stuck in a

standoff - which neither one of them truly wants - because they're each letting the other person determine their behavior.

On the other hand, when you are unilaterally virtuous, you head directly toward your own enlightened self-interest whether or not the other person cooperates. It feels good to be good, enjoying “the bliss of blamelessness” with a mind untroubled by guilt or regret. Staying principled fosters inner peace by reducing wrangles that would otherwise weigh on your mind. It increases the odds that others will treat you well in return. If need be, it sets you on the moral high ground.

Doing the right thing draws on both head and heart. Your prefrontal cortex (“head”) forms values, makes plans, and gives instructions to the rest of the brain. Your limbic system (“heart”) fuels the inner strength you use to do the right thing when it’s hard, and supports heart-centered virtues such as courage, generosity, and forgiveness. Even seemingly “heady” moral reasoning draws heavily on emotional processing; consequently, people with damage to the limbic system have a hard time making certain ethical decisions (Haidt 2007).

Virtue in the mind is supported by regulation in the brain. Both of these involve finding an equilibrium that is centered around healthy core aims, stays in bounds, and changes smoothly rather than abruptly or chaotically. To find that place of balance for yourself, let’s apply the nature of a healthy equilibrium to virtue. Then you’ll develop your own “code.” Throughout this exploration, keep listening to both your head and your heart for what it would mean to assert yourself virtuously.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

An Equilibrium of Virtue

First, identify your core aims. What are your purposes and principles in relationships? For example, one fundamental moral value is not to harm people, including yourself. If

your needs are not being met in a relationship, that's harmful to you. If you are mean or punishing, that harms others. Another potential aim might be to keep discovering the truth about yourself and the other person.

Second, stay in bounds. The Wise Speech section of Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path offers good guidelines for communication that stays within the lines: *Say only what is well-intended, true, beneficial, timely, expressed without harshness or malice, and - ideally - what is wanted.*

Several years ago I took up the precept of never speaking or acting out of anger. I must have violated it that first day in a dozen little ways, with exasperation, sarcasm, eye rolls, sniffs, whatever. But over time it's become more ingrained, and a very powerful practice. It forces a person to slow down in interactions, to avoid making matters worse by pouring the gasoline of anger on a smoldering fire, and to feel down below your the anger for the real issue (e.g., hurt, worry, guilt). Afterward, you feel good about yourself: you stayed in control and didn't add your own reactivity to a tense situation. Of course, the principle of staying in bounds applies to others, too. If someone violates your boundaries - for example, by treating you disrespectfully, or continuing to yell at you after you say you want it to stop - that pushes the equilibrium of your relationship out of bounds, and your code can certainly include not putting up with that. (We'll explore how to stand up for yourself in the section below on effective communication.)



Third, change smoothly. In a series of studies (1995), psychologist John Gottman documented the value of a slow start-up when discussing potentially upsetting matters with another person. As I've learned myself, that usually works a lot better than doing things like walking in the front door and immediately criticizing your partner for having all the lights on. Rapid, abrupt actions trigger alarms in the other person's SNS/HPAA system, which shake a relationship like poking a sleeping cat with a sharp stick. Small but skillful steps prevent these herky-jerky shifts - steps, such as asking if this is a good time to talk before diving in full steam, or not curtly cutting off a conversation that's striking too close to home.

Personal Code

Now write your personal code of unilateral relationship virtues. This could be a handful of words. Or more extensive dos and don'ts. Whatever its form, aim for language that is powerful and motivating, that makes sense to your head and touches your heart. It doesn't have to be perfect to be useful, and you can always revise it later. For example, it might include statements like these:

Listen more, talk less.

Don't yell or threaten other people, and don't let them do that to me.

Every day, ask my wife three questions in a row about how things are going for her.

Get home by six every night to have dinner with the family. Say what I need.

Be loving.

Keep my promises.

When you're done, visualize yourself acting according to your code no matter what happens. Imagine the good feelings and other rewards that this will bring you. Take these in

to help motivate yourself to truly live by your code. Then, when you do live by it and things go well, take that in, too.

Effective Communication

Lots can be said about how to communicate effectively. From thirty- plus years of working with people as a therapist or management consultant - and some painful lessons as a husband and father - I consider these the key points:

- Stay in touch with your deeper feelings and wants. The mind is like a giant parfait, with softer, child-like, and more essential layers under harder, adult-like, and more superficial ones. Based on this inner mindfulness, keep clarifying your aims in the interaction. For

example, do you just want to be listened to? Is there something in particular you want to be sure will never happen again?

- Take responsibility for getting your needs met in the relationship. Stay focused on the prize, whatever it is for you, and keep coming back to it. If the other person has important topics of his own, often it works best to take turns, focusing on one topic at a time, rather than mixing them together.

- Communicate primarily for yourself, not to produce a particular response from



the other person. Sure, it's reasonable to hope for some good results over there. But if you communicate in order to fix, change, or convince another person, the success of your communications will depend on how she reacts to you, and then it's out of your hands. Plus, the other person is likely to be more open to you if she doesn't feel pressed to change in some way.

- Stay guided by your personal code. At the end of the day, what you and the other person will mainly remember is not what you said but *how* you said it. Be careful about your tone, and avoid language that is fault-finding, exaggerated, or inflammatory.
- When you speak, keep coming back to your own experience - notably, your emotions, body sensations, and underlying hopes and wishes - rather than talking about events, such as the other person's actions, and your opinions about them. No one can argue with your experience; it is what it is, and you are the world's expert on it. When you share your experience, take responsibility for it, and don't blame the other person for it. As appropriate,



convey its deeper layers, such as the longings for love that lie beneath jealousy. Even though this openness is often scary, the deeper layers contain what's most vital to get at for both you and the other person. The universality of these layers and their relatively unthreatening nature also increase the chance that the other person will lower his guard and hear what you have to say. I highly recommend the approach Marshall Rosenberg details in *Nonviolent Communication* (2nd Edition 2008), which has essentially three parts: *When X happens* [described factually, not judgmentally], *I feel Y* [especially the deeper, softer emotions], *because I need Z* [fundamental needs and wants].

- Try to experience your truth as you speak it. This will increase your inner mindfulness, and probably also help the other person empathize with you. Notice any tightness in the eyes, throat, chest, belly, or floor of the pelvis, and see if you can relax it to allow your experience to flow more freely.
- Use the power of embodied emotion: take the physical stance of a feeling or attitude - which might not be your usual posture - to aid the expression of it (Niedenthal 2007). For example, if you typically hold back, try talking while leaning slightly forward; if you tend to push away sadness, soften your eyes; if you find it hard to be assertive, shift your shoulders to open your chest.
- If you think you might get triggered by the interaction and lose your way, help your prefrontal cortex to help you - an interesting circularity! - by sorting out your key points in advance, even writing them down. To keep your words and tone clean, imagine a video recording being made of your interaction: act so that you wouldn't wince if you saw it.
- If you are solving a problem with someone, establish the facts (if you can). This usually narrows the disagreement and brings in useful information. But mainly focus on the future, not the past. Most quarrels are about the past: what happened, how bad it was, who said what, how it was said, extenuating circumstances, and so on. Instead, try to agree about how things will be *from now on*. Be as clear as possible. If it helps, write it down. Tacitly or explicitly, you are making agreements with each other that should be taken as seriously as commitments at work.
- Take maximum reasonable responsibility for the other person's issues with you. Identify

what there is to correct on your part, and correct it unilaterally - even if that person keeps blowing it with you. One by one, keep crossing off her legitimate complaints. It's fine to put some attention on trying to influence her behavior, but focus mainly on being honorable, benevolent, and increasingly skillful yourself. This is definitely the road less traveled, but it's the one that's both kind and smart. You can't control how she treats you, but you *can* control how you treat her: these are the causes you can actually tend to. And doing what's right regardless of her behavior is a good way to encourage her to treat you well.

- Give it time. As time passes - weeks and months, not years - the truth about the other person will become clearer. For example: Does he respect your boundaries? Will he keep agreements? Can he repair misunderstandings? What is his learning curve for self-understanding and interpersonal skills (appropriate to the type of relationship)? What are his true intentions (revealed over time by his actions)?
- When you see another person clearly, sometimes you realize that the relationship needs to change to match what you can actually count on. This goes two ways: a relationship that's bigger than its real foundation is a set-up for disappointment and hurt, while a relationship that's smaller than its foundation is a lost opportunity. In both cases, focus on



your own initiative, especially after you've made reasonable efforts to encourage changes in the other person.

For example, you usually can't make a coworker stop being dismissive of you, but you can "shrink" the relationship - so it's closer to the size of its true foundation - by minimizing your contacts with him, doing an excellent job on your own, building up alliances with other people, and arranging for the quality of your work to be seen widely. Conversely, if there is a large foundation of love in your marriage but your mate is not that emotionally nurturing, you can try to "grow" the relationship on your own by paying particular attention to when he expresses caring through his actions and soaking that into your heart, by drawing him into situations with a culture of warmth (e.g., dinner with friends, certain kinds of live music, meditation group), and perhaps by being more emotionally nurturing yourself.

- Throughout all of this, keep in mind the big picture, the 1,000-foot view. See the impermanence of whatever is at issue, and the many causes and conditions that led to it. See the collateral damage - the suffering - that results when you cling to your desires and opinions or take things personally. Over the long haul,



most of what we argue about with others really doesn't matter that much.

- Above all, try to preserve your fundamental orientation of compassion and kindness. You can differ vigorously with people while simultaneously holding them in your heart. For example, bearing in mind all that has happened in Tibet since it was invaded in 1950, consider how the Dalai Lama has spoken of the Chinese government as: *my friend, the enemy* (Brehony 2001, 217). Or consider Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for twenty-seven years - much of that time doing hard labor in a quarry - often receiving mail just once every six months. It's said that he despaired of losing contact with people he loved, so he decided to bring love to his guards while continuing to stand firm in his opposition to apartheid. It was hard for the guards to mistreat him when he was being loving, so the authorities had to keep replacing them, but Mandela would just love the new ones, too. In fact, at his inauguration as president of South Africa, one of his former guards was seated in the front row.

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Skillful Means

The [Skillful Means](#) wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Seeing Goodness in Others

Purpose / Effects

Looking for the good qualities - such as strengths, good intentions, talents, virtues, efforts - in another person can have many benefits. Seeing the goodness in someone can improve your interactions and relationship with that person, and also bring out the best in him or her. Through this practice you are inclining your mind to look for the good, while also offering others the gift of being “seen” with kindness.

Method

Summary

Look for good qualities in one or more people you meet each day.

Long Version

- When you wake up in the morning, set the intention to look for the good qualities in one or more people you encounter this day.
 - When you meet someone, look for one or more good qualities in him or her.
- These qualities can be mild, such as a basic sense of fair play. The other person

does not need to be a saint, and can have problematic qualities as well (as most of us do).

- Remember that, just like you, this person wishes to be safe, happy, and free from suffering.
- Imagine that you are seeing a fundamentally noble being deep down inside him or her.
- Let the intention of seeing good in others guide your actions as you speak and interact with this person.
- Notice how this person responds to being seen and treated in this way. Also, notice your internal responses toward this person.
- If you wish, gradually increase the number of days you do this practice. Also, work with seeing goodness in all people you encounter, including strangers or difficult people.

History

Seeing goodness in others is practiced in many cultures and praised by many, including the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela. The method presented here was adapted from a practice created by Jack Kornfield called Seeing The Secret Goodness, and a practice by James Baraz titled Looking for Joy.

Caution

Sometimes it can be challenging to find good qualities in strangers or difficult people. Be patient with yourself as you do this practice, and keep continuing to search for any good qualities in this person.

Notes

In India, it is common to greet others by bowing and saying, “namaste,” which means, “I honor the divine in you.”

See Also

[Lovingkindness Meditation](#)

[Seeing Yourself with Love](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.