**The Neuroscience of Mindfulness**

**** **Dr DAVID ROCK**

We generally think of [mindfulness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mindfulness) as an idea that has been around for thousands of years.

When you understand the underlying physiology of mindfulness, you begin to see that any discussion about human change, learning, [education](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/education), even [politics](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics) and social issues, ends up being about mindfulness. That's because mindfulness, in some ways, is simply the opposite of mindlessness. And mindlessness is the cause of a tremendous amount of human suffering.

One of the reasons mindfulness can be difficult to talk about, in particular when discussing mindfulness with the busy people who run our companies and institutions, is that these people tend to spend little time thinking about themselves and other people. They spend a lot of time thinking about strategy, data, and systems. As a result, the circuits involved in thinking about oneself and other people, the medial prefrontal cortex, tend to be not too well developed. I write more about this in a paper called [‘Managing with the brain in mind](http://www.strategy-business.com/article/09306?gko=5df7f" \t "_blank)' recently.

I have taught mindfulness to deans of medical schools, to senior executives at major technology firms, and to MBA students from dozens of countries. When you explain step by step, how it works and how it effects your brain, and give people a chance to experience it, even the most cynical, anti-self-awareness agitator can't help but see that they will be better off practicing this skill. The key is to be able to explain the actual [neuroscience](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/neuroscience) involved. Here's some of the highlights of how mindfulness impacts the brain, from [Your Brain at Work:](http://www.amazon.com/Your-Brain-Work-Strategies-Distraction/dp/0061771295/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1242347783&sr=8-1" \t "_blank)

**Mindfulness and the two networks**  
A 2007 study called "[Mindfulness meditation reveals distinct neural modes of self-reference](http://scan.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/short/2/4/313" \t "_blank)" by Norman Farb at the University of Toronto, along with six other scientists, broke new ground in our [understanding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) of mindfulness from a neuroscience perspective.

Farb and his colleagues worked out a way to study how human beings experience their own moment-to-moment experience. They discovered that people have two distinct ways of interacting with the world, using two different sets of networks.

**The Narrative Network**

One network for experiencing your experience involves what is called the "[default network"](http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/317/5834/43b?rss=1" \t "_blank), which includes regions of the medial prefrontal cortex, along with [memory](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/memory) regions such as the hippocampus. This network is called default because it becomes active when not much else is happening, and you think about yourself.

This default network also becomes active when you think about yourself or other people, it holds together a "narrative". A narrative is a story line with characters interacting with each other over time. The brain holds vast stores of information about your own and other people's history. When the default network is active, you are thinking about your history and future and all the people you know, including yourself, and how this giant tapestry of information weaves together. In this way, in the Farb study they like to call the default network the ‘narrative' circuitry. (I like the **‘narrative network'** term for every-day usage as it's easier to remember and a bit more elegant than ‘default' when talking about mindfulness.)

If you are sitting on the edge of a jetty in summer, a nice breeze blowing in your hair and a cold drink in your hand, instead of taking in the beautiful day you might find yourself thinking about what to cook for dinner tonight, and whether you will be embarrased by making a mess of the meal. This is your Narrative Network in action. It's the network involved in planning, daydreaming and ruminating.

When you experience the world using this narrative network, you take in information from the outside world, process it through a filter of what everything means, and add your interpretations. Sitting on the dock with your narrative circuit active, a cool breeze isn't a cool breeze, it's a sign than summer will be over soon, which starts you thinking about where to go skiing, and whether your ski suit needs a dry clean.

The narrative network is active for most of your waking moments and doesn't take much effort to operate. There's nothing wrong with this network, the point here is you don't want to limit yourself to only experiencing the world through this network.

**The Direct Experience Network**

The Farb study shows there is a whole other way of experiencing experience. Scientists call this type of experience one of direct experience. When the **Direct xperience network** is active, several different brain regions become more active. This includes the insula, a region that relates to perceiving bodily sensations. The anterior cingulate cortex is also activated, which is a region central to switching your attention.

When this direct experience network is activated, you are not thinking intently about the past or future, other people, or yourself, or considering much at all. Rather, you are experiencing information coming into your senses in real time. Sitting on the jetty, your attention is on the warmth of the sun on your skin, the cool breeze in your hair, and the cold drink in your hand.

A series of other studies has found that these two circuits, narrative and direct experience, are inversely correlated. In other words, if you think about an upcoming meeting while you wash dishes, you are more likely to overlook a broken glass and cut your hand, because the brain map involved in visual perception is less active when the narrative map is activated. You don't see as much (or hear as much, or feel as much, or sense anything as much) when you are lost in thought. Sadly, even a cold drink doesn't taste as good in this state.

Fortunately, this scenario works both ways. When you focus your attention on incoming data, such as the feeling of the water on your hands while you wash up, it reduces activation of the narrative circuitry. This explains why, for example, if your narrative circuitry is going crazy worrying about an upcoming stressful event, it helps to take a deep breath and focus on the present moment. All your senses "come alive" at that moment.

Let's recap these ideas. You can experience the world through your narrative circuitry, which will be useful for planning, goal setting, and strategizing. You can also experience the world more directly, which enables more sensory information to be perceived.

Experiencing the world through the direct experience network allows you to get closer to the reality of any event. You perceive more information about events occurring around you, as well as more accurate information about these events. Noticing more real-time information makes you more flexible in how you respond to the world. You also become less imprisoned by the past, your habits, expectations or assumptions, and more able to respond to events as they unfold.

In the Farb experiment, people who regularly practiced noticing the narrative and direct experience paths, such as regular meditators, had stronger differentiation between the two paths. They knew which path they were on at any time, and could switch between them more easily. Whereas people who had not practiced noticing these paths were more likely to automatically take the narrative path.

This isn't just a theory. A study by [Kirk Brown](http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=15556264" \t "_blank) found that people high on a mindfulness scale were more aware of their [unconscious](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/unconscious) processes. Additionally these people had more [cognitive](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/cognition) control, and a greater ability to shape what they do and what they say, than people lower on the mindfulness scale. If you're on the jetty in the breeze and you're someone with a good level or mindfulness, you are more likely to notice that you're missing a lovely day worrying about tonight's dinner, and focus your attention onto the warm sun instead. When you make this change in your attention, you change the functioning of your brain, and this can have a long-term impact on how your brain works too.

**Why we need to keep being reminded about mindfulness**  
[John Teasdale](http://mbct.co.uk/mbct-programme-developers/" \t "_blank), recently retired, was one of the leading mindfulness researchers. Teasdale explains, "Mindfulness is a habit, it's something the more one does, the more likely one is to be in that mode with less and less effort... it's a skill that can be learned. It's accessing something we already have. Mindfulness isn't difficult. What's difficult is to remember to be mindful." I [love](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships) this last statement. Mindfulness isn't difficult: the hard part is remembering to do it.

**Practice, but you don't have to sit down and breathe.**  
So practicing mindfulness is important, as you're more likely to then remember to do it.   
The key to practicing mindfulness is just to practice focusing your attention onto a direct sense, and to do so often. It helps to use a rich stream of data. You can hold your attention to the feeling of your foot on the floor easier than the feeling of your little toe on the floor: there's more data to tap into. You can practice mindfulness while you are eating, walking, talking, doing just about anything.vBuilding mindfulness doesn't mean you have to sit still and watch your breath. You can find a way that suits your lifestyle. My wife and I built a 10 second ritual into the evening meal with my kids, which involves just stopping and noticing three small breaths together before we eat. The added bonus is it makes a great dinner taste even better.

What ever practice you do develop, practice it. The more mindful you become, the better decisions you will make, and the more you will achieve your own [goals](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/motivation), rather than other people's goals for you.

**Dr. David Rock** is one of the thought leaders in the human-performance coaching field. Since the mid-90's, David has trained over 10,000 executive, personal and workplace coaches in more than 64 countries. He is the author of Quiet Leadership: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work, the textbook Coaching with the Brain in Mind: Foundations for Practice and recently, Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long (Harper Business, 2009). David coined the term NeuroLeadership and is the co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, a global initiative bringing together neuroscientists and leadership experts to build a new science for leadership development. David is also the founder and CEO of NeuroLeadership Group, which helps Fortune 500 clients transform thinking and performance. David is a guest lecturer at universities around the globe, including Oxford University's Said Business School. He has a Professional Doctorate in the Neuroscience of Leadership from Middlesex University in the UK. He lives in NYC with his wife and two young daughters.

*(This article has been slightly abridged and edited for use in the Mindful Leadership course at Al Akhawayn University, Morocco.)*