

Mindfulness vs. Mindlessness by Ellen Langer

Ellen Langer is a professor of psychology at Harvard University. She has explored the difference between being mindful and being mindless. Her definition of mindfulness is different from ours: 'the simple act of actively noticing things'. However, her insights are often relevant to us.

She talked about the nature of mindlessness being:

- Entrapment by categories by using words to make a picture of the world and not taking account of how things change, for example, by assuming that a footballer is man,
- Automatic behaviour, for example the second statement here is treated by people in the same way that they treat the third statement.
 - 'May I use the Xerox machine?'
 - 'May I use the Xerox machine because I want to make copies?'
 - 'May I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?'
- Acting from a single perspective, as when someone pretends to hurt themselves and tells onlooker that need an Ace bandage and then the onlooker doesn't try to find an alternative if an Ace bandage is not available.

Behaviour can make sense at one time and then things change and our behaviour doesn't. When we're not there we don't know we're not there. We're frequently in error but rarely in doubt.

Mindless	Mindful
Past over-determines the present	Being situated in the present
Trapped in a single perspective Insensitive to context	Sensitive to context and perspective
Rule and routine governed	Rule and routine guided
Typically in error but rarely in doubt	Noticing novelty reveals uncertainty

Two everyday practices to increase mindfulness

- Notice new things. At any moment you can look around and find something you haven't noticed before.
- Make it new in very subtle ways that only you would notice. When you are doing a task you have done before, remember a time when you did it well and then try to do it again like that, but subtly different in a way where only you would notice the difference.
- Take a broader perspective, for example seeing mistakes as opportunities or looking over an expanse of time rather than focusing just on the current situation.