

GOING NOWHERE: KEYS TO PRESENT MOMENT AWARENESS

WHERE WE ARE

Typically, we're distracted. We are fully physically present and minimally mentally present; our body is here, but the mind is focused elsewhere. We fulfill the most basic requirements for mental presence—we look at people who are talking but don't listen. We keep our eyes on the road but don't see. We aren't bad, lazy, or unconscientious people. We're just preoccupied.

Our thoughts preoccupy us. Important memories sneak up on us and bring us back in the past. We replay difficult conversations and imagine alternative endings. We fantasize or ruminate about the future. Maybe we daydream, and maybe we are caught in worrisome what-ifs. We reflect back, we look forward. We're preoccupied, and we miss the power of the present.

We're so used to being preoccupied that we don't even notice we're preoccupied. (Noticing is an important step toward greater mindful awareness.) It's normal to be talking to a patient, typing orders, and finding our mind wandering. We're as much involved in our wandering as we are in the patient encounter where our body is sitting, and fingers are typing. We can lose our concept of what *right here, right now* really feels like. We miss the opportunity to breathe, be and inhabit *this moment*.

WHERE WE'RE GOING

Let's attempt to go nowhere. We're staying right here. Fully present, fully aware, fully focused, fully engaged. Mind-body-spirit converging *right here, right now*. This isn't easy. It takes effort, and it can feel uncomfortable at times. It also heals us and connects us.

HOW TO GET HERE: PRESENCE TAKES PRACTICES FOR ALL OF US

The practice of mindful awareness provides us with a framework for noticing the here and now while actively working to stay in the here and now. We use things that are with us in the present to anchor ourselves in the present. Take breath, for example. Your mind may be wandering 20 years into the future, but your breath is right here in this moment, you can't send breath 20 years into the future with your mind, but your breath can bring your mind back to right here and now. If you feel skeptical about this, note what happens when you stop breathing. Suddenly, here the mind is. Welcome.

Sometimes the here and now is hard to look at, let alone to inhabit. The here and now wounds, smarts, taxes, frightens, bores, and bothers. For these moments, we make space and fortify ourselves with compassion, loving-kindness, empathy, and equanimity. We allow ourselves to be as we are in this moment. We simply breathe and be, even if for just a

minute or two. We can grow our ability to notice and be through practice, and these qualities in turn bolster and deepen our practice.

WHY BOTHER?

Minds are made to wander: It's what they do. Sometimes minds wander to pleasant places holding our hopes, our dreams, our escape routes. Unfortunately, only inhabiting this world leaves us more vulnerable to suffering. The present has a way of finding us. Either we can meet it head on with compassionate awareness, or it can sneak up on us and make us uncomfortable.

Sometimes minds wander to painful past places filled with critical self-talk, or we get stuck in future worry ruminating on fears that haven't actually happened (paralyzing what-if land). Anchoring in our present grounds and centers us in what is. It helps us exhale and let go of what isn't, what was, or what will be. We can find moments of peaceful release in the right here and now.

The present is powerful for us, and it's also a gift we give to others. Our presence in the here and now allows us to connect with others in a way that isn't possible if we're distracted and not fully here. Our fully present self is one of the most therapeutic interventions we can offer to others.

Mindful awareness practice is an invitation to fully experience the moments that make up our lives, and it is a means for doing so. It is a prescription for living with intention and meaningful purpose.

AUTHOR

"Going Nowhere: Keys to Present Moment Awareness" was written by [Adrienne Hampton](#), MD with updates by Julia Yates, LCSW (2014, updated 2023).

This Whole Health tool was made possible through a collaborative effort between the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program, VA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, and Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.