

## 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 to the fabulous (fill-in-the-blank) vacation that we were so sad to see end. We replay difficult conversations and imagine alternative endings. We fantasize about the myriad ways in which things will be improved, more appealing, or otherwise more positive in the next little while. We plan birthday parties and career trajectories. We ruminate about finances. Again...we're preoccupied.

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 planning what we'll do this evening. We're as much involved in our imaginings about "this evening" 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 inhabit *this moment*.

### Where We're Going

Nowhere. We're staying right here. Fully present, fully aware, fully focused, fully engaged. Mind-body-spirit converging *right here, right now*.

### How To Get Here: Practice Makes Presence

The practice of mindful awareness provides us with a framework for arriving in the here and now, and maintaining our presence in the here and now. We use things that are anchored in the present to anchor ourselves in the present. Take breath, for example. Your mind may be wandering 20 years into the future, planning your retirement on a yacht, but your breath is right here. 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 fortify ourselves with compassion, loving-kindness, empathy, and equanimity. We grow these qualities through practice, and these qualities in turn bolster and deepen our practice.



## Why Bother?

The world of our imaginings is alluring and even a little magical. It can feel like a nice place to go. It holds our hopes, our dreams, our escape routes. Unfortunately, inhabiting that world leaves us even more vulnerable to suffering. The present has a way of finding us. Either we can meet it head on with measured enthusiasm, or it can sneak up on us and make us uncomfortable.

The present is also richer than we give it credit for, but if we have never really been here, we can't know that. We take that on a measure of faith. 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. Sometimes our presence is the most therapeutic intervention 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(s)

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Adrienne Hampton, MD (2014, updated 2018). The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.