Living in the Moment
Harness the power and peace of the present.

QUICK OVERVIEW
If you've ever found yourself driving home from work on autopilot or felt yourself going through the motions at work, you're not alone. It's human. But it's not necessarily the best way to live, according to Susan Smalley and Diana Winston, whose book, *Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness*, examines the benefits of leading a fully "examined" life.

Given that stress, anxiety, depression and just plain distractibility run rampant in our culture, Smalley and Winston suggest that we can fight a lot of our mental stress, lack of productivity, and even feelings of meaninglessness in our work and life by being more aware of our surroundings, our feelings and what causes them, the feelings of others, and the significance of everyday things. The authors offer a scientifically supported thesis on how to live better by living more mindfully, along with practices on how to do it that may have your brain (and your life) running more productively and happily in as little as a week.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
While Smalley and Winston point to extensive research in the fields of neurobiology, psychiatry, psychology and genetics that suggests mindful behavior—which can range from meditation to just being more aware of simple tasks—can increase happiness, satisfaction, productivity and purpose, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that could even lead skeptics to take a look.

The authors point to Green Mountain Coffee, a small public company based in Vermont that offers on-site meditation rooms as well as mindfulness classes to its 1,300 employees. Is it a coincidence that the company regularly makes *Forbes'* top 200 most financially successful small to medium-sized companies list? Smalley and Winston don't think so.

That's because their work has shown numerous examples of how mindfulness works. They point out, for example, how being more thoughtful in communication can change your environment at work and at home. If you evaluate your thoughts and how you're

SUCCESS Points
*In this book you'll learn:*

- How to live with greater compassion for yourself and others
- Strategies for coping with life and work challenges with less stress and grief
- How to change unproductive behaviors for greater success
- Ways to operate in work and in life with fewer preconceptions and less prejudice
- The key tools you need to develop for happiness

Da Capo Press
© 2010, Susan L. Smalley, Ph.D., and Diana Winston
ISBN: 9780738213248
288 pages, $16.95
going to present them before you speak (considering how they could be helpful or harmful, inspiring or demoralizing), you’ll get much better results from your verbal interactions with others. It’s a learnable skill, the authors say, that can lead you to be more sensitive to the needs and feelings of others and how to work with them to achieve mutually beneficial results. The grand idea behind all this is that everyone is interconnected and that the more awareness we have in our lives the more likely we’ll be kind to ourselves and to others, no matter how stressful life becomes.

Each chapter offers suggestions on how to be more mindful, and it’s easy to get started. For example, today, purposefully pay attention as you drive to or from work or school. Refuse to let your mind wander. Instead, focus on the road, the scenes you pass, the faces in the other cars. It’s a simple practice that could help you become more aware in other areas of your life.

In the midst of our techno-savvy yet anxiety-producing culture, scientific investigation has become increasingly interested in the ancient practice of mindfulness as an antidote of sorts to the ills of the modern world and as a tool for skillfully examining our lives. Extracted from the religious settings in which it was developed, mindfulness practice has become a secularized tool for investigation of the modern mind. This book is an introduction to the why and how of mindfulness, from a scientist (the why) and a mindfulness teacher (the how).

Mindfulness may be thought of as a state of consciousness, one characterized by attention to present experience with a stance of open curiosity. It is a quality of attention that can be brought to any experience. Mindfulness can be cultivated through explicit practices, such as meditation or yoga or t’ai chi, or even through creative processes in the arts or walking in nature. Mindfulness can also be enhanced less explicitly by adopting a generally mindful approach to life. As you learn the principles and techniques of mindfulness, you can apply them to any moment in the day, whether you are eating, driving, showering, or sending an e-mail.

Although mindfulness does not remove the ups and downs of life, it changes how experiences like losing a job, getting a divorce, struggling at home or at school, births, marriages, illnesses, death and dying influence you and how you influence the experience. In other words, mindfulness changes your relationship to life. Learning to live mindfully does not mean living in a “perfect” world, but rather, living a full and contented life in a world in which both joys and challenges are a given.

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WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness may be the mental “seat belt” that protects us along the bumpy, twisting, turning road of life, whether we encounter unexpected drop-offs, terrible accidents, or smooth sailing.

A mindful mental state differs from being lost in thoughts of the past or future or acting on “autopilot.” To “practice mindfulness” is to exercise or work on honing this state of mind. We all probably agree that that sounds like a good idea; after all, who wants to be unaware or unconscious of their own experiences? Yet, as we will see, consciousness is pretty elusive and difficult to define scientifically, and it changes all the time. We think we know something one day only to discover that what we thought we knew was not quite right. We constantly “wake up” to knowledge, shifting from ignorance to awareness. What we are conscious of changes constantly.

Self-regulation refers to the monitoring and modification of behavior (or of thought, emotion, or body states) to achieve a goal or adapt to the environmental context. Many factors influence self-regulation: In addition to your DNA blueprints, how you were raised, and the culture, your self-regulation is also influenced by factors such as medication (like valium), your environment (notice your ability to calm yourself while on vacation versus when you’re at work), and alcohol, among others. You are constantly regulating your body state (your activity level), your cognitive state (your thoughts), your emotional state (your feelings), and your relationship state (how you relate to yourself and others). Mindfulness meditation can influence any of these areas of self-regulation,
and with repeated practice, state changes may even become more permanent traits.

Despite the idea that mindfulness is an inherent trait influenced by genes, biology, and experience, mindfulness is clearly a state as well, one that can be changed through a wide range of experiences but may or may not last over time. A large and growing body of research demonstrates that mindfulness practice changes subjective and physiological states. The immune system gets stronger, as reflected by an increase in the number of cells fighting infection. Brain activity changes, moving toward patterns that coincide with calm yet focused states of attention. Brain structure itself seems to change: Among longtime meditators, gray matter (the tissue containing neurons) is thicker in certain brain regions compared with non-meditators. Lastly, even gene expression patterns seem to differ with the induction of a mindful state of mind. On a more subjective level, feelings of anxiety and depression lessen, well-being improves, and relationships toward self, others, and the planet are healthier. Taken together, this evidence indicates that mindfulness can be learned like any other skill and that the practice of mindfulness may be a powerful way to affect neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to form new connections in response to the environment—as well as epigenetics, the regulation of genes (turning on and off their expression) in response to the environment.

Our brains are dynamic and malleable, just like our genes—whose expression is turned on or off as a function of our environmental experiences. In fact, much of twenty-first-century science is focused on the malleability of our biology as a consequence of experience, including the experiences we create through our thoughts, feelings, and actions. The circular nature of this relationship is like the chicken and the egg: Experience shapes our biology, and our biology shapes our experiences. Neither our brains nor our genes are fixed, and mindfulness is a means of discovering their fluidity.

Mindfulness is a tool we can use to examine conceptual frameworks, to lessen the influence of preconceptions, and to experience “what is” by choice rather than through drugs or neurological damage. Perhaps ironically, this echoes the basic principle of all science: to observe data without preconceived ideas as to what the data will show. Mindfulness and science share this principle about the discovery of knowledge.

To incorporate mindfulness into your life does not require that you change your life in any drastic way—you still attend to your normal array of family, work, social, and leisure time activities—but you can learn to perform all of these activities with a different state of awareness, one that is open, curious, and nonreactive.

What Can Mindfulness Do?

The research exploring mindfulness, although still relatively new, is demonstrating that repeated practice can lead to changes in our lives, including:

- Reducing stress
- Reducing chronic physical pain
- Boosting the body’s immune system to fight disease
- Coping with painful life events, such as the death of a loved one or major illness
- Dealing with negative emotions like anger, fear, and greed
- Increasing self-awareness to detect harmful reactive patterns of thought, feeling, and action
- Improving attention or concentration
- Enhancing positive emotions, including happiness and compassion
- Increasing interpersonal skills and relationships
- Reducing addictive behaviors, such as eating disorders, alcoholism, and smoking
- Enhancing performance, whether in work, sports, or academics
- Stimulating and releasing creativity
- Changing positively the actual structure of our brains

Mindfulness is an antidote to the dullness and disconnection of life lived on automatic pilot. By applying mindfulness, you can counteract that spaced-out feeling you may sometimes have in the midst of your day. You can learn to take an ordinary experience, give it your present-moment attention, and experience it as extra-ordinary. With many moments of your life taking on extraordinary qualities, you are likely to feel more “alive.” Sometimes sights and sounds seem stronger, more varied and textured. Spicing up life with mindfulness can change
the way you approach ordinary activities and bring you new enthusiasm and joy.

Mindfulness can take you out of your habitual thinking by bringing you to what is actually happening at the present time. Stop right now, take a breath, and pay close attention to the present. Exactly in this moment, are things, for the most part, okay? The future has not happened, the past is over, and right now, well, it just is. This foundational technique of learning mindfulness—learning to return your mind to the present, no matter what is happening—is tremendously helpful for working with challenging thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

Over the long term, you may notice a striking effect: Kindness begins to permeate the rest of your life. Learning to develop an accepting attitude through moments of mindfulness helps you develop a kind and compassionate attitude toward yourself and others over the long term. This idea is based on the principle that what you practice you cultivate.

FEELING BAD

Mindfulness is about being present in a curious manner with whatever emotion arises—good or bad. It is about experiencing things as they are and in that process increasing your awareness, including your discriminating or investigative abilities. Mindfulness is a means of investigation, but who really wants to dig into negative feelings and to experience them as they are?

What you practice you cultivate.

Yet, with mindfulness, negative emotions may become a little less negative—by which we mean that they will be more easily recognized and understood, and some may even diminish in intensity. When you see an emotion for what it is—whether bad or good—you’re better able to detect the source of the emotion and to let go of tendencies either to want things to change or to want them to stay the same.

No one is immune to negative emotions, and how we deal with them can prevent, modify, or reduce their severity. In the extreme—when mood, anxiety, or other negative emotions persist and cause impairment—they can lead to a psychiatric disorder. Catching your emotional reactions early, when they are still small, is a way to alter your actions to keep them from fueling difficult situations.

Anxiety is one of the most prevalent sources of bad feelings in the world today. It is an unpleasant sense of apprehension often accompanied by symptoms such as headaches, perspiration, heart palpitation, stomach discomfort, and restlessness. About one in four adults suffer from extreme anxiety, while one in three report that they experience extreme stress every month. Anxiety disorder is the most common mental illness in the United States, affecting 40 million adults, and it has increased in severity over the past forty years. For example, children who were considered “not anxious” in the 1980s score higher on anxiety scales than did child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.

Getting Started

Mindfulness meditation is a method of becoming more aware of the obstacles that keep you from changing your behavior. Many obstacles may be encoded unconsciously as habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and then action. Mindfulness can help bring these patterns into conscious awareness so that you can select alternatives and create change.

The basic tenet of both mindfulness and science is to observe things as they are. Getting started in mindfulness is a matter of honing your subjective skill of investigation, which is a skill complementary to science as a means of obtaining knowledge. These two investigative paths have a lot in common. Both science and mindfulness rely on observation, the former using a third-person perspective, the latter a first-person perspective. Both expect the practitioner to observe with an unbiased point of view, one not shaded by personal beliefs or attitudes.
Anxiety is the feeling associated with stress, and stress is on the rise. According to the American Psychological Association, two-thirds of all visits to a family physician are due to stress-related symptoms, 43 percent of us suffer from health effects of stress, and stress is linked to the six leading causes of death. Furthermore, half of Americans report that their stress levels have increased in the last five years.

The human capacity to project ourselves through space and time has led them to imagine “what if” in the absence of any real threat, creating anxiety when it is not warranted for survival.

Despite the fact that every day people are disturbed by, overwhelmed by, and impaired by difficult emotions, most of us do not have the skills to find perspective amid strong emotions. Mindfulness can be a key to learning how to relate to emotions in healthy and useful ways.

Emotions are a temporary set of experiences—physiological changes that we associate with thoughts and feelings and body states—passing through us, almost like weather patterns. Sometimes inside us it is stormy, sometimes mild and cloudy, sometimes sunny. These emotional “weather” patterns change all the time, yet when we are in the midst of them, we think they are going to stick around forever. To approach them mindfully is to notice their transient nature. And with practice, you can learn to neither indulge nor cut off your emotions, but to be present with them with care and attention.

**FEELING GOOD AND FINDING HAPPINESS**

Bliss, joy, and exuberance are words that describe states of extreme happiness, which is a feeling we all experience at times, triggered by events like the birth of a child, a marriage, an unexpected job offer, or a creative burst. Are these blissful states the same as happiness in day-to-day life? Why are some people happier than others? How can we increase happiness?

A shared feature of these various states of bliss is a sense of self-transcendence, a rising above the traditional day-to-day, self-centered view of the world.

Self-transcendent experiences are often affiliated with feelings of bliss and joy, as well as creativity, freedom, and distortions of time.

The development of positive emotion is rooted in an underlying principle borne out by the science of neuroplasticity: What you practice you will cultivate. Simply, if you practice being mean and nasty, you will get meaner and nastier; if you practice being kind and caring, you will get kinder and more caring. It is an obvious equation, but people tend to overlook the sheer simplicity of it and don’t consider the ramifications of their behaviors, habits, and actions, especially when they are in the midst of them.

**MINDFULNESS IN ACTION**

Mindfulness practice begins inside a single individual. Each of us, working to regulate our attention, reduce our reactivity, and cultivate more positive emotions, can improve our own health and happiness. With this individual focus, mindfulness may appear to be just a self-improvement technique, but it is much more than that. Not only is mindfulness a valuable tool for seeing our thoughts, feelings, and habitual patterns more clearly, but it is from this knowledge, coupled with reflection and kindness, that wisdom and compassion emerge. It is in our actions and our interactions with others and the planet that the effects of mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion can ripple around the world.

This increasing wisdom and compassion from insight into ourselves can lead to action. Once we see ourselves clearly, we might set out to act in nonharming and respectful ways with our families, coworkers, and communities. Or we may form a desire to go beyond simply nonharming, in order to serve or effect positive change in the world.

Spicing up life with mindfulness can change the way you approach ordinary activities and bring you new enthusiasm and joy.
**ACTION STEPS**

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. The next time you’re driving home from work, pay attention to the landscape, the buildings, other drivers, the music on the radio. Fully experience it. This is a good exercise for teaching you how to be more aware in your life.

2. The next time someone makes you angry (cutting you off in traffic, for example), take a moment before responding negatively, breathe deeply, and tell yourself something compassionate like “boy, I just got really angry, but likely that guy didn’t mean to cut me off; it’s okay.”

3. Practice more compassionate self-talk. Instead of criticizing yourself when you make a mistake, remind yourself that you’re human and that you’ll correct the problem.

4. Try to remind yourself that acting with negativity only cultivates more negativity, while operating with kindness promotes more kindness.

5. When life becomes challenging and you’re faced with fear or grief, remind yourself that emotions are temporary and will pass.

6. Teach yourself to live in the present by being aware of the moment you are in right now. Practicing this can help you stop worrying so much about the past and the future when life becomes difficult.

7. Remember that you can diffuse any stressful or difficult situation merely by reminding yourself to breathe deeply, as it will lower your blood pressure and slow down your pulse and give you a few seconds to calm down before reacting.

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**About the Authors**

Susan Smalley, Ph.D., is the founder and director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at the Jane and Terry Semel Institute of Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA. In her 20-year research career as a behavioral geneticist, Susan published extensively on autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and mindfulness. In addition, she is currently completing her second book and is a regular contributor to the Huffington Post and Psychology Today online communities.

Diana Winston is a former Buddhist nun who has been practicing mindfulness for 20 years. She is currently the director of Mindfulness Education at UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center, where she teaches mindfulness to the general public, health professionals, educators, and others. Diana is also the author of Wide Awake: A Buddhist Guide for Teens and the CD Mindful Meditations.

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**Recommended Reading**

If you enjoyed this summary of Fully Present, you may also want to check out:

- A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook by Bob Stahl, Elisha Goldstein and Jon Kabat-Zinn
- The Mindfulness Solution by Ronald D. Siegel
- Brainstorm by Eric Maisel and Ann Maisel

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