

**Session 2: Attention and Mindfulness**

What you pay attention to becomes your life, but did you know, you are missing 50% of your life? That’s right. You think you are paying attention but about 50% of what is happening around you is slipping by without your awareness.

That’s because you are in a sea of stimuli and your brain cannot possibly process all that data, so it carefully filters out what appears to be unnecessary noise and chatter. An example of the way your brain is filtering is when you are having a conversation with someone in a noisy room.

An example of the way your brain is filtering is when you are having a conversation with someone in a noisy room. Your full attention is on the conversation with the other person and your brains is tamping down the sounds of other conversations until…. You hear your name or an infant baby’s cry! Then suddenly, you become very aware the conversations and noise around you and, without thinking about it, you are scanning the room for who said your name or where the infant is located. It’s automatic! These sounds and some other specific sounds unique to you, will almost always break through your brain’s filtering system and divert your attention.

Your attention is a valuable, finite commodity and so, like money, you can “pay” attention, you can “give” attention and your attention can be “stolen.” Learning to manage your attention is a skill and a very important one to your sense of wellbeing and success. To do that, you need to understand a few things about your attention system.

To do that, you need to understand a few things about your attention system. First, it exists as a defense against the overwhelming sea of stimuli you swim in every day – as I explained earlier, there is just too much information for you to process so it filters the unnecessary noise and chatter for you. Second, your brain is designed to think and its constantly on. That means that background thoughts and distractions will constantly bubble up, vying for your attention. Third, whatever you pay attention to gets amplified – it dominates your thoughts and anything else in your environment fades into the background. Fourth, your attention is fragile – if you are stressed, overly tired, or feeling sad, your attention is depleted. Finally, your attention is trainable, you can teach yourself to maintain your attention on a specific goal for longer periods of time. Even people diagnosed with ADD can learn to manage their attention better. They tend to talk about ADD as if it is a disease like diabetes or a heart condition but ADD is not a disease – it is a specific pattern of thinking that, if managed correctly, can actually be an asset.

The biggest culprit that steals your attention is your time traveling. That’s right, you are a time traveler. Under stress or when your mind is not completely engaged with the present, your mind gets yanked into the past by a memory which becomes a ruminative loop. Or you get launched into the future by a worry and you begin catastrophizing events, increasing your sense of threat.

Mark Twain once said, “I've lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.” Unfortunately, without active intervention, his comment is the truth for most of us. Stressful events hijack our attention away from the present moment.

The fix for time traveling is paying attention to the present-moment experience without adding our stories or meanings to it and avoiding emotional reaction to it. Easier said than done – it takes practice but you wouldn’t try lifting a heavy weight without training and it’s the same for mindfulness. It takes practice but with practice it becomes easy to notice when you are having a thought and then making the decision to let it go if it is interfering with your moving toward your current goal. It takes practice to train our brain away from the default tendencies that are not serving us so that we can gather information from the present moment. We need to be able to truly observe what’s happening in the here and now so that we are properly prepared to navigate the future when it arrives. We want to meet challenges as they occur and be fully present when it matters the most.

What you pay attention to is your life. Your attention is your portal to learning. A bright light in your brain shines on what you are paying attention to and everything else is dimmed. Learning depends on actively determining what your light is being focused on and what is allowed to be dampened and ignored. I said at the beginning, 50% of what is happening around you is slipping by unnoticed. Be sure that you are paying attention to the right 50%! Again, what you pay attention to is your life!