Lesson 1

WHY ATTENTION MATTERS

Welcome, everyone, to the three-day mindfulness challenge. My name’s Elisha Goldstein. I’m a clinical psychologist. I’m an author of multiple books on mindfulness and well-being. I’m the co-founder of the Center for Mindful Living in Los Angeles, and also the creator of a six-month online coaching program called A Course in Mindful Living.

Over the next three video lessons, we’re going to be talking about the essentials to increase focus, so you can perform better at home and at work. And, if you’re interested in learning about what one of the most invaluable strengths you can ever learn to, not only reduce your stress and help manage overwhelm, but put you on the path to making the changes you want to make in your life, and making them more sustainable, you’re in the right place.

Today, we’re going to be talking about why it’s not time management, but it’s attention management that actually really matters. And, we’re also going to talk about why making change is so hard, and what’s the number one obstacle we all face to consistently focus on what matters consistently, in order to make the changes we want to make. In the end I’m going to give you three of the most important things to begin to do to get you started, to make this really practical in your life.

We’ll also add a short meditation below from a Course of Mindful Living that’s going to support you with the material we’re talking about here. So, before we begin, I want you to take a moment to congratulate yourself for taking the time out of all your daily business, which your mind said you would, could, should be doing, for your own learning, health, and well-being.

Okay. So, now let’s get started. Consider something for a moment you’ve tried to change, but have had a difficult time sustaining it. You might think of things like exercise, or eating right, or maybe you wanted to get a writing practice going, or perhaps a meditation...
practice. And consider for a moment that through the time you tried to create and make it sustainable, it’s been hard. There’s been difficulties. We’ve veered off the path. And the question is really, why?

The reality is it’s becoming harder and harder to pay attention to our intentions. We set intentions, things we want to do, we throw at the north star and say, that’s the thing I want to do, that’s my aspiration. And, it’s becoming harder and harder to sustain those practices. So, the reason being is, and we can go to a study that came out about 10 years ago by two Harvard psychologists, Matthew Killingsworth and Dan Gilbert, who gave us an app on our phones that was called Track your Happiness. And on that app, they’re basically asked us, how do you feel right now? What are you doing? And, are you actually thinking about something other than the thing you’re intending to be doing?

What they found was that our minds are wandering off of our intentions about 47% of the time. So what does that mean? That’s about half of our lives. So, it’s difficult to make inroads on the things we’re wanting to do if we’re only paying attention to them for half of the time. So, smart phones also certainly haven’t really helped with that, for that matter. So our biggest obstacle is focus. That’s an issue.

So I want to talk to you a little bit about what’s behind the obstacle of focus. Our brain’s actually wired to guard against change. So, consider this, we’re made of habits. These are automatic, implicit thoughts, emotions, sensations, and behaviors that arise out of repetition. At some point in doing this consistently, whatever it is, our body just begins to take over, it uses the experiences from the past to make decisions in the present moment.

So, examples are, we wake up in the morning, we grab our cell phone. We check our texts or chats, or emails, or maybe Facebook. And, we take pictures in the day, we share those pictures, and we oftentimes see the same people daily, and react to them in a similar way. We do similar activities at work, and by the time we come home, we have a similar type of ritual around the house that we do, and bedtime routine, and then we sleep on the same side of the bed. And this becomes our programming.
So, oftentimes, people call this procedural memory, our brain memorizes procedures, or behavioral chunking, it brings kind of behaviors together. This is why you can feel oftentimes in your life like, whoa, after you go to bed, night after night you feel like it was sort of Groundhog’s Day to some degree.

So as this happens, we no longer need to pay attention. As we get this procedural memory, or this behavioral chunking, our body just does it for us. We not longer actually need to pay attention. As they say, use it or lose it. And so, our attention starts to fade away. So when we actually try to make a change something different that’s outside of a regular routine, we now have this deep and fast and known unconscious programming. And what’s important to remember is that our brain is wired to survive, and not be happy. So, the brain likes what’s known, and it fears the unknown. Its code is to keep us safe. So the brain would rather keep us in suffering than take the risk and do something that’s more unknown, or uncertain. Even if it can support our own happiness.

So, it starts to object. It starts to throw up limiting beliefs. Things like, you can’t do this, or, don’t do that, a disaster might happen, begins to catastrophize. Or it puts it off in some way and says, you can do this later. There’s other things more important, surfing the web or our social media. So, you fall back, and into the pattern routine when you believe those thoughts. It’s just re-affirming.

But with this knowledge, we don’t need to be enslaved by our past programming. We can be aware of that space between stimulus and response, and be the creator of our own lives. And the first step is to hone our attention. But before we learn to attend, there’s something that will support our attention that we need to do, and that’s the first essential thing, which is learn how to relax our nervous system. We need to learn about how to pause, dip, and meet the operating system of those routine patterns and motivations that are driven by needing to feel certain in some way, or safe. And gain back control of our minds, and pay attention to what matters.

So, the programming that a lot of have is, typically we’re wound up, we’re tense, we’re goal-oriented. Even around this, learning to relax, you say, I’m going to take it full-on. I’m
going to crush this test, in some way.

But I’m going to ask you to do something really different. The first step is in beginning the reprogramming is to learn how to relax, to learn how to let go. To learn how to allow our release of our busy mind through the exhalation of our breath. To allow us to be aware of the tension in our body, release it with our breath and through our bodies. Softening our bodies. And this is a skill that can be cultivated. We can learn to become total pros at relaxation, if you can believe it. Or our kids could really use this. ’Cause right now, they’re being trained to seize up, to multitask, to be highly competitive, to have an incredibly busy minds.

And so, the first question is, can you learn how to relax? Can you learn how to set your mind and body at ease? Can you learn how to unwind? And it’s this skill, again, that can be cultivated. Just to give you a little extra motivation if you actually needed it, there’s a lot of benefits of relaxing. It can help you turn the volume down on your worry and rumination. It can protect your heart. Some research has shown, and you can consider this, how can it lower your hear rate, and lower your blood pressure. It can also help you boost your memory. It helps you make better decisions when we’re more relaxed. It can help keep us slim, because we no longer fall prey to the stress-eating that might be there. And also protects our mental health, meaning like at the foundation of anxiety and depression, is the experience of stress. So if we can turn the volume down the stress, those experiences of anxiety and depression are less likely to actually be queued.

Finally, feeling more relaxed protects our brain. Chronic stress over time has been shown to eat away at certain areas of our brain that are important for, let’s say, our own learning and memory, as an example. So as we learn how to relax, we can actually protect those areas of the brain.

The Dali Lama said, “A calm mind brings inner strength and self-confidence.” So that’s very important for good health. So listen to the Dali Lama here. So tip number one, where do you brace and relax? Consider that. Be on the lookout for where you tense in
your life, release with the exhale, soften your body. You might consider whether that’s in relationships, or at home, at work, in traffic, with your kids. Where’s the context of where you typically brace? And then be on the lookout for that, and intentionally soften your body, or adjust your body, to actually relax it.

Allan Wallace, a long-time meditation teacher and professor said, “Attention is the most valuable instrument, that serves as a telescope through which we select, bring into focus, and magnify the stimuli we experience in our world.” So tip number two. Practice single-focusing or single-tasking. At the gym, don’t just be at the gym and watch TV at the same time. Use it as an opportunity to hone your attention. Just be at the gym. Be aware of your body moving, lifting, whatever it’s doing. In that moment, at a business meeting, see if you can take time out of the multitasking you’re doing, and just pay attention to the business meeting.

Remember, you’re not, not doing anything. You’re actually practicing honing your attention. When you’re preparing meals, just bring awareness to preparing the meals. Again, honing your attention. When being with your kids, just attend to your kids, nothing else.

Again, remember, these are all ways to hone your attention. Something that’s going to help you in the future make the changes you want to make in your life. So, funny thing happens is that you do this anyway. As you might be aware, is you actually begin to enjoy it. You get more things done as well. And, this inspires more motivation to practice this in your life. So consider this, if mindfulness is about learning how to pay attention to our intention, it follows that strengthening our ability to attend would support mindfulness in daily life.

So tip number three, and maybe the most important one. Start now, don’t wait. Most people wait for some difficult moment, or when they feel like there’s a dire situation, to make the change. You don’t have to wait for that. You don’t have to wait for pain and suffering. If that’s there, use it as a motivation. But if it’s not there, you don’t have to. You can learn to wake up and take control of your life in the good moments too.
So in the end, number one, it’s not time management, it’s attention management we’re after. To be successful, we have to have attention. We have to have focus. Number two, your auto-pilot is set to make unhealthy decisions. Remember that it’s wired to be safe, not happy. So we have to understand, accept the reality that we’re programmed. That our minds made out of habits, and it’s wired to keep us safe, and to move out of that to a state of uncertainly, even if it’s in the direction of our own happiness, our brain will work to sabotage that. And, with that awareness, we can step outside of that conditioning, and make a response that’s more in line with our own values.

Number three, to support focus, we need to learn how to relax our nervous systems. And so, what we want to do is look where to bracing is, and look where we can relax. This is one of the first things we do in the six-month program in Course of Mindful Living. We can learn how to practice also single-tasking. And most importantly, don’t wait. You don’t have to wait for some difficult moment to happen. You can also practice in the good moments, and begin. As the 15th Century Indian poet Kabir said, "Wherever you are, that’s the entry point."

So, the secret is to understand that it’s up to you to do this. When you do this well, when you bring this in to your life, you gain control of your life. You get a sense of that control. And, all of this starts to truly come alive in your life.

So, that about wraps it up. But, remember, we’re just getting started. This was just a first lesson. So let’s get going with these tasks that we brought in here. Setting up the essential foundations for focus, for success at home and work. Play with them, enjoy them. If you have any questions or comments, please do add them below. I’m in there, and looking through all of the comments and questions, and really enjoying it. So, feel free to get in there, get into the community, and I will see you in Challenge Number Two.