



RCSIHealth[®]

Mini Lecture Series presented by the
Centre for Positive Psychology and Health

Managing Coronaphobia: Stay Present

1 February 2021

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Have you ever experienced the following?

- Inability to maintain focus while reading a book
- Inability to maintain focus while watching a film or TV show
- Tuning in and out of conversations with friends and family members
- Driving somewhere and ending up going in the wrong direction or forgetting how you got to your destination
- Leaving front door keys in the lock, mislaying car keys
- Leaving a pot to burn on the cooker

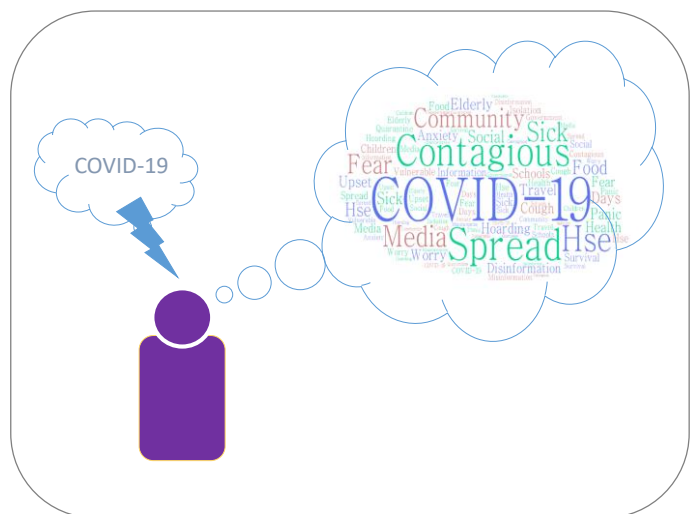


The chances are that you don't have a progressive brain disease like dementia

**– something is making you
absent from the present
moment**



- When anxiety is present over long periods of time (longer than 6 weeks), many of us have a tendency to ruminate over past events or worry about an uncertain future
- The current pandemic, with all its associated uncertainties, instability and associated fear can put us in this place



- The brain can only do so much when your conscious awareness projects into the future
- The brain helps our heart to beat, lungs to breathe, keeps us upright and awake but it cant also keep tabs on a conversation with your friend about an interesting TV show or something in the news
- Inevitably, low priority tasks, not associated with keeping us alive, fall to the wayside, e.g. remembering our keys



There's nothing wrong with you – you are just having trouble staying present

- However, when we project into the future, worrying about uncertain events, we activate our stress response
- The brain cant tell the difference between a current physical threat and an imagined one, if you are telling it that both represent serious hazards to your health
- Imagine that you spend a few hours each day projecting into the future with these worries – the brain will be on permanent high alert

“For the brain - Perception is as important as reality”

The link between the wandering mind and happiness



STUDY: A wandering mind is an unhappy mind

- People's minds wandered frequently, regardless of what they were doing - **mind wandering occurred in 46.9% of the samples (2,250 adults)**
- People were less happy when their minds were wandering than when they were not - **people were no happier when thinking about pleasant topics**
- Mind wandering was generally **the cause**, and not merely the consequence, of unhappiness
- What people were thinking was a better predictor of their happiness than was what they were doing

BREVIA

A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind

Matthew A. Killingsworth* and Daniel T. Gilbert

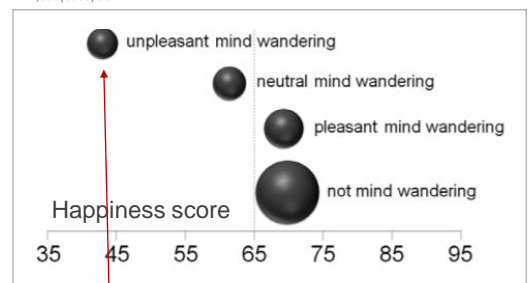
Unlike other animals, human beings spend a lot of time thinking about what is not going on around them, contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future, or will never happen at all. Indeed, "stimulus-independent thought" or "mind wandering" appears to be the brain's default mode of operation (1, 2). Although this ability is a remarkable evolutionary achievement that allows people to learn, reason, and plan, it may have an emotional cost. Many philosophical and religious traditions teach that happiness is to be found by living in the moment, and practitioners are trained to resist mind wandering and "to be here now." These traditions suggest that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. Are they right?

Laboratory experiments have revealed a great deal about the cognitive and neural bases of mind wandering (3–7), but little about its emotional consequences in everyday life. The most reliable method for investigating real-world emotion is experience sampling (8, 9). In this method, participants are prompted at random intervals throughout the day to report their current activity and how they are feeling. This method has been used to study a wide range of topics, including the least enjoyable. Although people's minds were more likely to wander to pleasant topics (42.5% of samples) or neutral topics (31% of samples), people were no happier when thinking about pleasant topics than about their current activity ($b = -0.52$, not significant) and were considerably unhappier when thinking about neutral topics ($b = -1.2$, $P < 0.001$) or unpleasant topics ($b = -23.8$, $P < 0.001$) than about their current activity (Fig. 1, bottom). Although negative moods are known to cause mind wandering (10), time-lag analysis strongly suggested that mind wandering in our sample was generally the cause, and not merely the consequence, of unhappiness (12).

Third, what people were thinking was a better predictor of their happiness than was what they were doing. The nature of people's activities explained 4.6% of the within-person variance in happiness, and 3.2% of the between-person variance in happiness, but mind wandering explained 10.8% of within-person variance in happiness and 17.7% of between-person variance in happiness. The variance explained by mind wandering was largely independent of the variance explained by the nature of activities, suggesting that the two were independent influences on happiness.

In conclusion, a human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.

Killingsworth MA, Gilbert DT. A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*. 2010 Nov 12;330(6006):932.



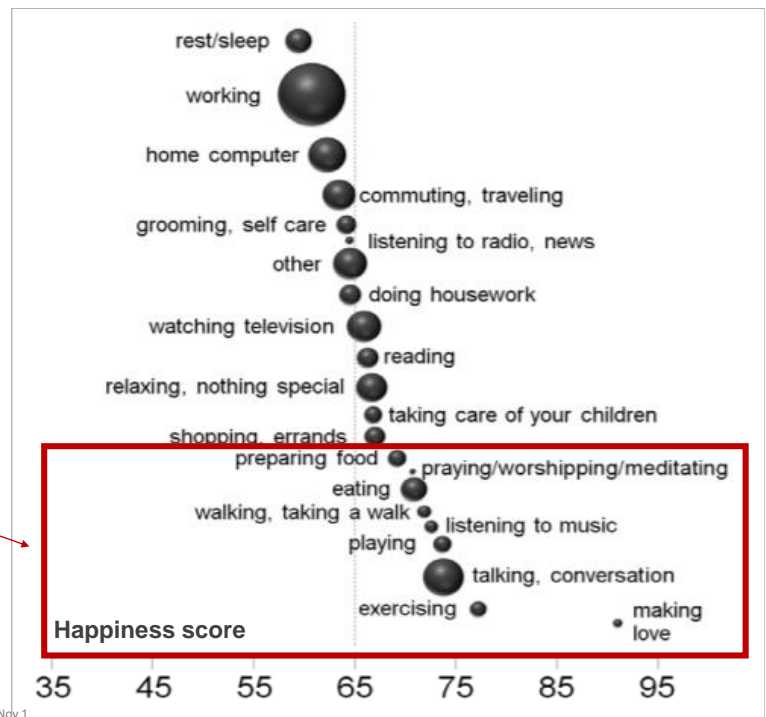
A wandering mind is an unhappy mind

How do we stop this process?

Engage practices that anchor us in the present moment

**Evidence-based practices
that anchor us in the
present moment?**

Clues from 2010 research



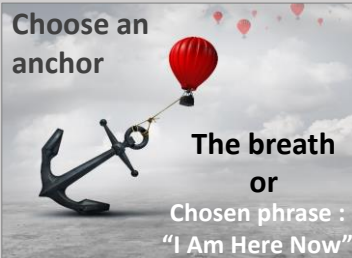
Source: Killingsworth MA, Gilbert DT. A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. Science. 2010 Nov 12;332(6041):1271-1273.

Evidence-based practices that anchor us in the present moment

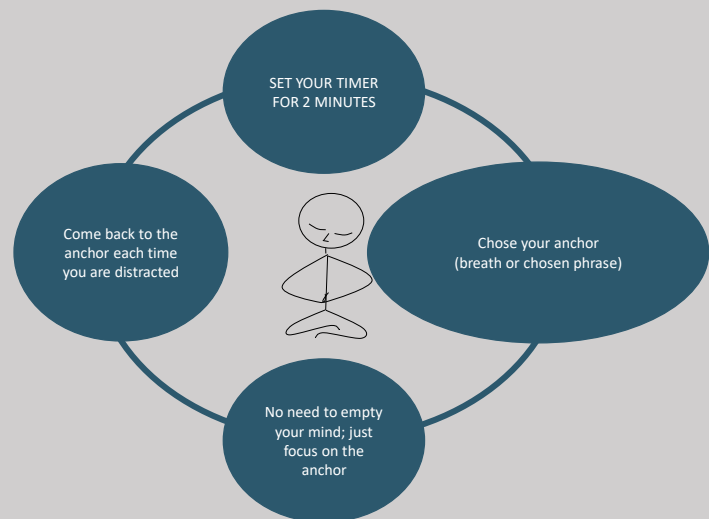
- Conscious exercise – continuous focus on what the body is engaged in (no mind wandering)
- Singing
- Creative acts (drawing, painting, sculpting, woodwork, metal work, solving puzzles, playing an instrument, amateur dramatics, games)
- Cooking
- Mindful eating
- Meditation and prayer
- Focusing on others – active listening
- Volunteering



MEDITATION POSTURE



Attention-based Training (ABT) - Disengage from thought, emotions, sensations & memories by simply returning to your anchor, on a moment by moment basis



Put a schedule in place to practice your anchoring practices

- Practice in the morning and the evening – put reminders into your phone
- Write down or say aloud what your goal is – “I want to remain in the present moment”
- State this goal daily – bring it into conscious awareness
- **FIRST AID.** Have practices in mind to engage quickly, if you catch your mind wandering – meditate, mantra (*I-am-here-now*), prayer, focus on the breath, describe your immediate surroundings, list the counties in each Irish province, list the players in your favourite sports team etc.



Be compassionate

- It is the nature of the mind to wander
- Each time the mind drags you down the river into a daydream – simply return to your anchor activity
- It doesn't matter how many times you wander, as long as you return to your anchor activity
- Practice makes perfect – the brain is plastic
- How long would it take for you to learn a new musical instrument or become fluent in a new language?
- Apply the same allowances for practicing staying in the present moment – it takes a long time

“If you are depressed, you are living in the past, if you are anxious, you are living in the future, if you are at peace, you are living in the present.”

Lao Tzu

