

BEING PRESENT NOW!

By Kate Kent, Dipl. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM)

It is hard to be totally present all the time. Ask anyone. The mind flits from what happened to what will happen with lightening speed. Being in the past or future is not living and very little can be accomplished if we are not “here.” Being able to focus on what is at hand is a powerful tool that is well worth cultivating. This article is going to discuss why it is so hard to stay in the moment, how necessary it is to be so, and what can be done about it.



To what extent is your mind full of chatter of the past and future instead of being present in the moment? Ask yourself, what is stopping you from being mindfully present now? What is keeping you from experiencing and enjoying the richness of life at this moment? Are you worried about the future, or do you have guilt about something you did in the past? In the **now** our senses of hearing, seeing, and physical sensations come into play. So also do our emotions. We need to be able to hear what is going on, see what is around us and know how we are feeling.

The problem is not the anxiety (or other emotion). The problem is that one is so caught up in it one can't notice the day. Sometimes being in the present can be unpleasant and painful and it is easy to allow the mind's business to prevent one from feeling and dealing with what is happening in the present moment, especially in relationship with other people. But being in the present is necessary for both emotional and physical health. One cannot truly experience a relationship with another person if one is not present; one cannot healthily deal with emotions as they arise if one is not present. Using defence mechanisms, like rambling, laughing inappropriately, numbing out or “disappearing” to avoid feelings means the feelings stay in the body and become “baggage,” and we all know how “baggage” can destroy closeness.

Traditional Chinese Medicine theory has always recognized that emotions play a huge part in health and illness. The theory talks about the “seven emotions” consisting of joy, anger, sadness, grief, pensiveness, fear and fright. All these emotions appear in healthy individuals, but it is when one or many emotions are insufficient, i.e. suppressed, or excessive, as in uncontrolled rage, that they can cause illness.

For example, a young woman who came to see me for counselling was suffering from bad headaches and digestive problems which no treatments seemed to help. She felt exhausted, anxious, and depressed. Her relationships with both men and women always failed and caused her to feel lonely and unloved. She had grown up with a stepfather and mother both of whom had abused her physically and emotionally. Her birth father, with whom she had been able to establish a good relationship with, committed suicide just before she planned to visit him. She tried to describe a huge emptiness inside herself which she explained had been there for as long as she could remember. However, this emptiness was a defence against feeling because the moment I encouraged her to stop talking about it, i.e. intellectualizing, and instead feel what was going on inside of her, she became distant, and when I pointed this out she began to laugh uncontrollably, and when I pointed that out she went numb. These are all defensive mechanisms the subconscious erects in order not to feel the pain of the moment or the

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pain of emotions being held on to. If they weren't defences, then why would *experiencing* the emptiness inside of her cause her to laugh uncontrollably or distance or go numb? She was totally unaware of what she was doing because not feeling was how she had always protected herself from the reality of all the mixed emotions inside of her.

With a lot of work on her part and a lot of encouragement on mine, she was able to dip her toe in the present and, the moment she did so, strong emotions began to rise. These emotions were quickly overshadowed by a great deal of anxiety. Her parents had taught her that only bad people were angry and, in fact, if she showed any emotion at all it was received with a literal slap on her face. Understandably she was terrified of her emotional life and had very successfully suppressed it. She understood that this avoidance of feeling cost her dearly in her life and present relationships because she was unable to be present with anyone. She projected all the hurt she had received growing up onto every relationship she encountered and consequently went into each relationship with only a part of herself, the rest being securely locked away. Now she was doing the same with our relationship. Her health was also affected. Her shut down emotions blocked the flow of energy in her body causing headaches and digestive problems.

The challenge is to fully experience one's emotional life in the *present* and this in fact *releases* the mind and body from the strain of suppressing it. The feeling is that one will "lose it" or die. One won't. Quite the opposite is true, because truly experiencing all one's emotions is mind blowing, liberating, and powerful.

Eckhart Tolle in *The Power of Now* says "the greater part of human pain is unnecessary. It is self-created as long as the unobserved mind runs your life.... Unhappiness ultimately arises not from the circumstances of your life but from the conditioning of your mind."

We worked hard together dissecting her old beliefs and looking for evidence of their validity for her. Her parents had been forceful characters and the imprint of their strong beliefs had left a mark on her that seemed indelible. Gradually, she began to question these beliefs and she began to feel a spark of anger. The moment this spark ignited it stopped all the chatter in her head and she became present with me. It was as if she saw me for the first time. Our work became easier from that time on because she had had a taste of what being in the moment felt like and she was eager to throw off the passive, shut-down way she had been living her life.

It's hard to let troubling thoughts go. Imagine for a moment that you have hooks in your mind that catch and hold every wandering thought or every thought that bothers you, any anxiety, anger, fear, you name it. As long as that thought is "hooked," the reaction to anything pertaining to that particular hook will most likely be an unhealthy one because it is snared in the past and is not free to be in the present and dealt with. Hooks force one out of the moment, stop one from being focused on what needs attention at the time. One needs to create a *non-judgmental*, observing self, as in mindfulness meditation, that says "I notice that I am anxious, angry, etc. and I am fully aware of what that is like in my body, but at the same time I can also notice that the sky is blue." In a nutshell, the trick is to allow thoughts to pass through the mind *and body*, without getting attached to them.

Eckhart Tolle points out that in an emergency one is forced to be present because one's life depends on it. Don't wait for a life threatening emergency, learn to be present now.

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