

Principles of Conscious Well-Being

We are all conditioned

Each of us has existing networks in our brains that are responsible for perceptions, preferences, beliefs, and behaviors that show up without conscious thought or effort. Some of our conditioning works really well — it allows us to function in the world without having to constantly reinvent the wheel. Some of our conditioning does not work particularly well — it leads to behaviors that are not aligned with our deepest values or highest goals. Following our current conditioning is often more comfortable than stepping onto a new path. With practice, we can identify ineffective conditioning and choose new, more useful, approaches to life.

Getting distracted is normal

Human attention is designed to wander so that we don't overlook potential threats — this has been key to our survival as a species. However, there are side effects of this evolutionary adaptation — we get lost in thought, we miss things, we lose sight of what really matters. When our attention wanders from what is most important, we can put time and energy into efforts that are both dissatisfying and exhausting. With practice, we can learn to notice when our attention has wandered and bring it back to what really matters.

Feeling discomfort is normal

We have bodies that feel physical and emotional pain. We experience sensations and urges that are uncomfortable. Discomfort can be a source of important information. We live in a modern world that is focused on strategies for avoiding discomfort. Some of our efforts to avoid discomfort can keep us from pursuing meaningful goals and relationships. How we relate and respond to discomfort has an enormous impact on the quality of our lives, our relationships, and our performance. With practice, we can learn to accept and work more effectively with discomfort.

We are always practicing something

Your brain is constantly rewiring itself based upon what you do repeatedly. Your brain does not care whether you want to get better at something or not, it simply builds networks based on how you use your time and energy. The more we engage in a behavior, the more our brains adapt to it and make it automatic. So, however we use our time and energy builds skill. Each time we engage in conditioned behavior, we reinforce the networks that create it. If we refrain from conditioned behavior or engage in alternative behavior, then we weaken the existing conditioning and create new patterns.

Conscious Well-Being Practices for the Classroom

Open posture

Occasionally ask students to check the openness of their posture. Before a taking a test or getting a grade, you can observe student posture and remind them that closed posture increases stress hormones while open posture reduces stress hormones.

Minute of breathing

Have students pay attention to the sensations of the breath. When their attention wanders to a thought, noise, or another sensation, they can simply notice that and bring it back to the sensations of the breath. Remind them that they can use this to notice when their attention has wandered in a test and bring it back.

Silence to focus

Rather than get louder to quiet the class, try getting silent. Let students know that when you are quiet, this is the cue for them to bring their attention to what is happening in the class.

Ask where student attention is

Rather than simply telling students to pay attention, ask them to notice what they are paying attention to and bring it back to the class if necessary. Occasionally ask students how many people are thinking about something other than what is going on in class and acknowledge that this is human.

Pace of speech

Human beings need gaps in speech in order to process language and make meaning. When the teacher intentionally pauses, students can process and consider how new information connects to current understanding.

Listening to each other

Occasionally have students turn to each other and explain to a partner what you have been discussing. The partner just listens. Then switch.

In their own words

After doing the listening exercise, assess for understanding by asking for some pairs to share what they discussed in their own words.

Inviting honest feedback

Ask students to acknowledge how interested or uninterested they are in the class material. Ask students to acknowledge how clear or unclear they are about what is going on in class.

Standing in class

Have students stand from time to time. Human beings are not well-designed to sit and focus for 45-60 minutes at a time. When students are standing you can have them stretch, or pay attention to the sensations of standing or breathing.

Normalizing anxiety, stress, or boredom

A healthy human nervous system produces experiences such as anxiety, stress, or boredom. These experiences are not a problem in and of themselves. By acknowledging that these things are normal and not to be feared or avoided, students can learn how to work with them rather than get derailed fueling or fighting them.

Thoughts to Set Up a Conscious Discussion

Before we start this discussion, I am going to ask you to practice paying attention to whomever is speaking with the same level of focus you were just paying attention to your breath. This is a very useful practice in life. If you have thoughts or questions about what someone is saying, please wait until the person is done speaking.

And, I would like to acknowledge that some of us are very comfortable sharing our thoughts and some of us are very comfortable keeping our thoughts to ourselves. This is perfectly normal.

The goal of this discussion is to hear from as many people as possible about their experience, so that we can get to know each other better and so that we can have several different views of this experience to consider.

Consciously choosing your response to urges and discomfort in your body is one of the most useful skills a person can develop.

So, I am going to challenge some of you to feel your urge to speak, and to choose to allow others to speak first. I am going to challenge some of you to feel your urge not to speak, and to choose to speak up anyway.

Tools for Conscious Conversations

Tell me more...

Ask until you understand -- especially when your first reaction is resistance

Yes, and...

Acknowledge that multiple perspectives can exist at the same time

My story is...

Acknowledge your viewpoint as a viewpoint

That's normal...

Acknowledge that humans feel all kinds of stuff without justifying or refuting

How do you know?

Identifying feelings as phenomena that have a location and quality

What's most important?

Focusing attention on values, goals, and relationships.

What's next?

Identifying options for action, letting go, or spinning.

Checking in

What's going on?

How's it going?

What feels most important right now?

Where are you focused?

How can I help?

How can I support you?

Autonomy Judo

What actually happened?

What is most important?

What are your options?

What will you do next?

Uncomfortable Conversations

How I'm feeling about this conversation

Why I am having this conversation

My question, concern, request, or plan

Conscious Well-Being Reading List

TED talks

What Makes a Good Life by Robert Waldinger
The Power of Vulnerability by Brene Brown
How Your Body Language Shapes who you are by Amy Cuddy
The Surprising Science of Happiness by Daniel Gilbert
How I held my breath for 17 minutes by David Blaine
How to Make Stress Your Friend by Kelly McGonigal

Books

Mindfulness

[Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness by Diana Winston and Susan Smalley](#)

This is an accessible introduction to the science and practice of mindfulness meditation. Both of these authors teach and research at the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center.

[Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation by Daniel J. Siegel](#)

This is a great book for counselors and individuals interested in the impact of relationships and mindfulness upon the brain. Dr. Siegel is a professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine where he co-directs the Mindful Awareness Research Center. His writing is based upon research and his own practice.

[Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill by Matthieu Ricard](#)

This is a beautifully written book that lays out the science and practice of meditation as it relates to overall happiness. Ricard is a French Buddhist monk with a Ph.D. in molecular genetics.

[Mindfulness by Ellen Langer](#)

This is an accessible look at mindfulness in everyday life and the power of paying attention. Langer is a professor of psychology at Harvard. This is not about meditation so much as it is about orienting your life to the present.

[Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment--and Your Life by Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)

A book written beautifully and simply about the practice of being present. Kabat-Zinn is a molecular geneticist turned meditation teacher who pioneered the first mindfulness based stress reduction course.

[The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions by Christopher K. Germer.](#)

Mindful self-compassion is a skill that can be learned. It is a great tool for facing many of life's inevitable challenges. Germer is a clinical psychologist in private practice.

[The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

This is a classic written by a Vietnamese Buddhist monk many years ago. He is a great teacher who writes simply and poetically.

Positive Psychology

[Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being by Martin Seligman](#)

This book addresses the current research related to the qualities and practices that lead to a truly wonderful life. A professor of psychology at University of Pennsylvania, Seligman is considered to be the father of positive psychology.

[Positivity by Barbara Fredrickson](#)

Based on her "broaden and build" theory of positive emotions, Fredrickson shows how important certain emotional states can be to overall wellbeing. She also shares research about effective practices for cultivating these emotional states. Fredrickson is a professor of psychology and Principal Investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina.

[The Happiness Trap: A guide to ACT: the mindfulness-based program for reducing stress, overcoming fear, and creating a rich and meaningful life by Russ Harris and Steven Hayes](#)

ACT is acceptance and commitment therapy. When we can accept that happiness is not the "normal" state, then we can begin to work peacefully with just about anything. Harris is a doctor and trainer in ACT. Hayes is a professor of psychology at the University of Nevada.

[The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want by Sonja Lyubomirsky](#)

While genetics and environment certainly have an effect, our happiness is largely a function of what we do in life. Lyubomirsky is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside.

[The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness by Rinpoche Yongey Mingyur](#)

Written by the "happiest man in the world," this is a great account of the way that mental training can improve quality of life. Rinpoche Yongey Mingyur is a Tibetan Buddhist teacher who has worked with western scientists to look at the effect of meditation upon the brain.

[Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind by Kristin Neff](#)

Self-compassion is more of a predictor of resilience and success than is self-esteem. Neff provides research and practices to support the cultivation of self-compassion. Neff is a professor in the Human Development and Culture Educational Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Austin.

[Curious?: Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life by Todd Kashdan](#)

His book looks at the importance of curiosity to overall wellbeing. He also discusses the ways that we can cultivate curiosity. Todd Kashdan is a researcher and professor of psychology at George Mason University.

[Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier by Robert A. Emmons](#)

This book looks at the considerable research that supports gratitude as one of the healthiest states to cultivate. Emmons is a researcher and professor in psychology at UC Davis.

The Brain and The Mind

[The Brain: The Story of You by David Eagleman](#)

This is a very accessible guide to many things that are truly fascinating about the human brain, It is the companion to the PBS series by the same name.

[Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain by David Eagleman](#)

This awesome book cites research to show how much of the workings of the brain fall completely outside our awareness. If you are interested in the brain in everyday life, this is a must read. Eagleman is one of the great thinkers of our time. He directs the Laboratory for Perception and Action at the Baylor College of Medicine.

[The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons](#)

A great look at all the things we don't see and why. It is hard to read this book and believe that you are really seeing all that there is to see. Chabris is a professor of psychology and neurology and a visiting scholar at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence. Simons is an experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist at the University of Illinois.

[The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force by Jeffrey Schwartz](#)

Our brain literally rewires itself based upon experience, and this has profound implications for the treatment of obsessive compulsive disorders among other things. Schwartz is a psychiatrist at the UCLA school of medicine.

[Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman](#)

There are two systems of thinking - one is fast and one is slow. This is a large, dense, and brilliant book. Kahneman is a professor emeritus of psychology and public affairs at Princeton University. He received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002.

[Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain: How a New Science Reveals Our Extraordinary Potential to Transform Ourselves by Sharon Begley](#)

A great summary of the research related to mental training such as meditation and the effect it has upon the structure and function of the brain. Begley has been a science writer and editor for Reuters, Wall Street Journal, and Newsweek.

[Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers by Robert Sapolsky](#)

A great exploration of the physiology of stress. Sapolsky is a professor of biology and neurology at Stanford who does most of his research on baboons in Kenya. He is also a great writer and speaker. If you like biology and are interested in the science of stress, this is a must.

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol S. Dweck

If we think that effort and effective strategies lead to achievement (growth mindset), this has profound positive impact upon our success. By contrast, believing that we either have intelligence or we don't (fixed mindset) can have a significant negative impact. Dweck, is a researcher and professor of psychology at Stanford.

On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not by Robert Alan Burton

Certainty is a felt experience; the brain does not require factual evidence of any kind in order for us to feel certain of something. Burton is the Associate Chief of the Department of Neurosciences at UCSF Hospital.

Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain by Antonio Damasio

Damasio, a professor of neuroscience at USC, argues that emotion and cognition are inseparable and each is equally necessary to human flourishing.

The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science by Norman Doidge

What an amazing book about the ways that the brain can rewire itself based upon experience and practice. A must read for the brain fan! Doidge is on the faculty at the University of Toronto's Department of Psychiatry.

The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel, and Live--and How You Can Change Them by Richard J. Davidson

A brilliant and accessible brain-based case for the importance of emotional style and the practices to cultivate healthy emotions. Davidson is a professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience, the Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging & Behavior, and the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin.

Practice and Training

Bounce: Mozart, Federer, Picasso, Beckham, and the Science of Success by Mathew Syed

Syed looks at the elements that lead to high performance, mostly from the standpoint of athletics. He is a columnist for the London Times and is informed by his own experience at the #1 rated table tennis player in Britain.

Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change by Timothy Wilson

This book lays out the research about which interventions are effective and which are ineffective when it comes to changing behavior. Wilson is the professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and a researcher of self-knowledge and affective forecasting..

Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else by Geoffrey Colvin

A look at the research related to optimal performance and skill acquisition. Colvin is an editor and columnist for FORTUNE magazine.

[The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You've Been Told About Genetics, Talent, and IQ Is Wrong by David Shenk](#)

An argument against the common wisdom that genetics are the final, or even most important, word when it comes to intelligence and a host of "gifts." Shenk is a correspondent for TheAtlantic.com, and has contributed to National Geographic, Slate, The New York Times, Gourmet, Harper's, The New Yorker, NPR, and PBS.

[The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business by Charles Duhigg](#)

A close look at the ways that habits form and how they can be changed. The first section is particularly useful. Duhigg is a staff writer at the New York Times.

[The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How by Daniel Coyle](#)

Talent takes practice - a lot of practice. Coyle is a contributing editor for Outside magazine.

[The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It by Kelly McGonigal](#)

We are actually wired to use willpower, but we often derail ourselves. McGonigal is a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University.