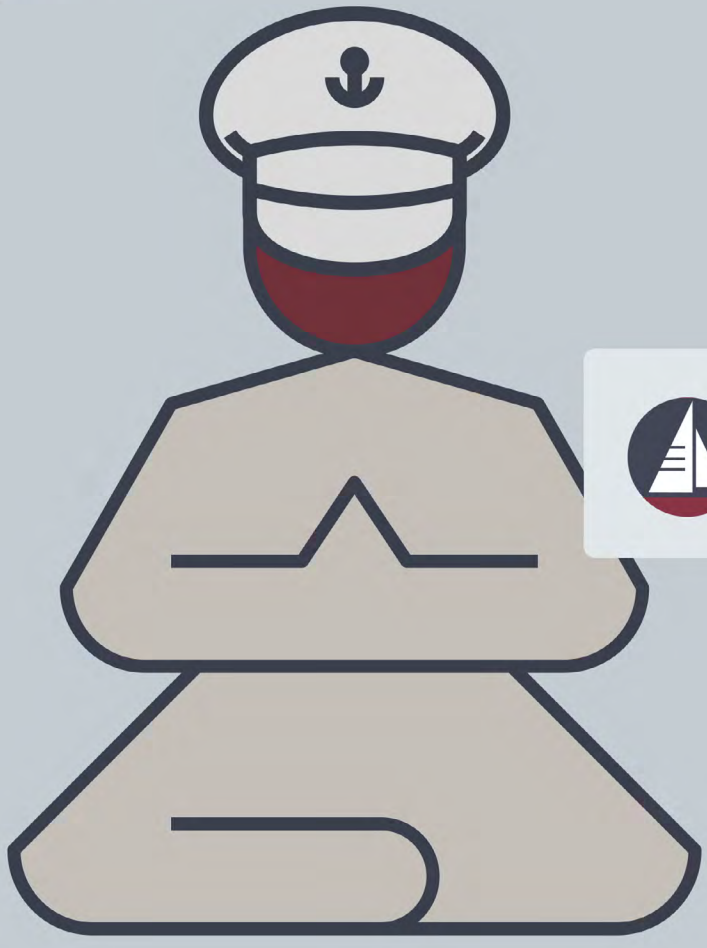
MINDFULNESS & THE SAILBOAT METAPHOR



A SAILBOAT METAPHOR SERIES

HANDBOOK EXTENSION

Copyright © PositivePsychology.com B.V. All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced, relabelled, or used in any commercial manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher.

Permission is not required for personal or professional use, such as in a coaching- or classroom setting.

PositivePsychology.com B.V.
Gandhiplein 16
6229HN MAASTRICHT
The Netherlands

https://PositivePsychology.com

Table of Contents

Observation 5

Acceptance 6

References 10

Mindfulness is defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" [1]. In other words, mindfulness involves directing attention to the experience in the present moment and a non-evaluative observation of that experience [2].

MINDFUL ATTENTION

One of the four key elements of the captain in the sailboat metaphor is "attention". The "attention" of the captain to each of the sailboat elements directly reflects his level of mindfulness. Mindful attention involves attention that is kind, open, non-judgmental, and focused on the present moment. Thus, a mindful captain is a captain whose attention to the different elements of the sailboat generally reflects a mindful quality.

Research has consistently shown that mindfulness is an important predictor of well-being. For instance, the trait of mindfulness has been associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and greater life satisfaction, sense of autonomy, and competence [3]. Higher levels of mindfulness have also been associated with various positive psychological outcomes, such as lower levels of neuroticism, depression, and anxiety and higher levels of self-esteem, vitality, and authenticity [3,4].

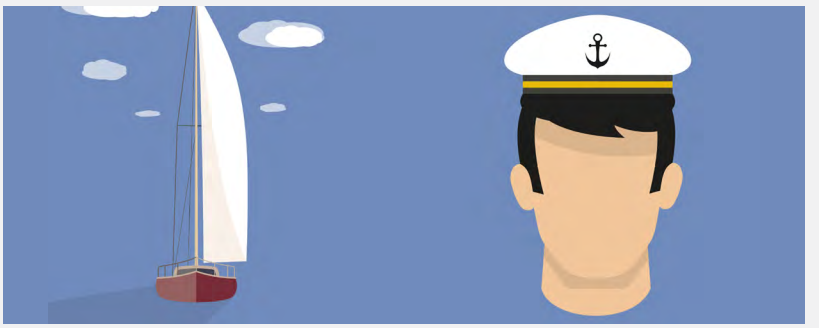
Mindfulness can be trained. Research has revealed that meditation enhances mindfulness and promotes psychological health in clinical and non-clinical samples (for meta-analyses, see [5,6]. However, mindfulness is not a "rarified state open only to those undergoing . . . training" ([7]; also see [8]). Researchers have convincingly

argued that mindfulness is a natural human capacity that any untrained layperson can experience [3,8,7,9,10]. Natural variations in mindfulness are likely due to variations in genetic predisposition and environmental influences [11].

OBSERVATION

A key process underlying mindfulness is the ability to observe thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Rather than being completely immersed in them, mindful individuals can see these thoughts, emotions, and sensations as transient states. By observing these states, they can notice the difference between the states themselves and the person observing them. Entering this observer mode allows one to "step outside of one's immediate experience, thereby changing the very nature of that experience" [12]. This process has been referred to as decentering [12], reperceiving [13], and deautomatization [14].

OBSERVATION



The observing stance cultivated in mindfulness practice is represented in the boat metaphor by the captain. The fact that the captain is introduced as a separate entity within the sailboat metaphor stresses the difference between the elements of the sailboat (the feelings, values, weaknesses, goals, etc.) and the captain who relates to these elements. The captain is not these elements, but he is the one who can become aware of them, act, change his motivation towards them, and so on. Simply put, the captain is the observer and has control over the boat.

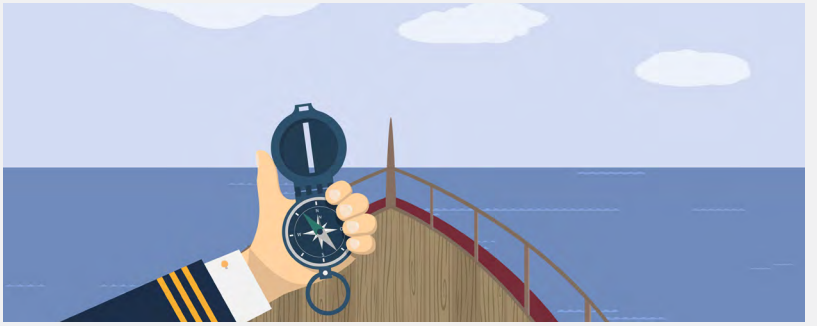
Observation allows the individual to counteract the negative effects of identifying with a certain state. Identification means that an internal state fully guides the individual's behavior. For example, an individual who identifies with anger will show aggressive behavior. This person may say and do things that he/she regrets afterward. Likewise, an individual who identifies with thoughts may believe his/her thoughts are true. Regardless of whether they are true or not, the thoughts guide his/her behavior. The ability to take a step back and see a difference between thoughts, emotions, and the individual observing them, introduces the freedom to dis-identify from these states. Mindfulness allows people to pause and make conscious choices rather than being guided by automatic patterns of responding that result from identifying with certain states.

ACCEPTANCE

Another core component of mindfulness is acceptance. Many people deal with negative experiences through control [15]. Control-based strategies, like suppression, aim to decrease the frequency and intensity of unwanted experiences. Deliberate avoidance of internal states is conceptualized as experiential avoidance [16] and linked to a great diversity of negative outcomes. For instance, in clinical and non-clinical samples, experiential avoidance is strongly correlated with measures of general psychopathology [17] and specific measures of anxiety and depression [Forsyth et al., 2003; 18,19,20]. When we frequently say "no" to difficult experiences and label them as problematic and "wrong," we are cultivating a negative relationship with these experiences. Although negative experiences are inevitable, we try to fight and avoid them. Paradoxically, research has repeatedly demonstrated that trying to control and avoid negative experiences often increases their intensity, which is called the paradox of control (see [21]). A different way of dealing with emotions is through acceptance. Acceptance can be defined as the willingness to fully experience difficult emotions and experiences. In contrast to control-based strategies, the individual fully accepts and experiences the emotion without attempting to alter, avoid, or control it [16].

Mindfulness is based on the principle that how we relate to aversive experiences rather than aversive states themselves is problematic. A different, more tolerant, and flexible relationship with difficult experiences can be cultivated using acceptance. Accordingly, research has revealed that acceptance-based coping with negative thoughts and emotions dissolves them more effectively than control-based strategies, such as suppression [22,23]. Similarly, mindfulness is negatively correlated with verbal aggression, hostility, and anger [24].

ACCEPTANCE



Both acceptance and control can be regarded as behavioral actions. In terms of the sailboat metaphor, the captain's actions reflect mindful acceptance. For instance, how does the captain deal with feedback from his compass? Is he able to read and use the compass even if the information from the compass is causing the ship to sail in difficult waters? Or is he trying to control or avoid the feedback from the compass? In other words, how does the individual deal with negative emotions? Is he/she able to pay attention to them and allow them to be present, or is he/she trying to avoid or control them? The role of acceptance is also reflected by how the captain deals with the weather. Does the captain accept weather that cannot be controlled, or does he try to control what is uncontrollable?

Table. 1. Examples of how mindfulness can be translated using the sailboat metaphor

High Level of Mindfulness	Element of the sailboat	Metaphorical translation
The individual can focus his/her attention on the activities in each life domain rather than doing multiple (unrelated) things simultaneously.	Water (life domains)	The captain can focus his attention on the activities in each life domain rather than doing multiple (unrelated) things simultaneously.
The individual allows him/herself to experience emotions as they arise.	Compass (emotions/feelings)	The captain allows the compass to guide the journey of the boat.
The individual can pay attention to difficult experiences and make choices based on these experiences.		The captain can effectively use feedback from the compass, even if using this feedback means that the journey will be temporarily less pleasant.
The information from a moment-to-moment connection with inner experiences, rather than implicit rules and rigid beliefs, guides the individual's actions.		The information provided by the compass generally determines the direction of the boat, rather than the captain's implicit rules and rigid beliefs.
The individual is aware of what matters to him and regularly checks whether he/she acts according to his/her values.	Steering wheel (Values)	The boat captain monitors the steering wheel; he regularly checks whether the boat is still on course.
The individual can see the difference between personal weaknesses, like problematic thoughts or feelings, and him/herself, the observer.	Leaks (weakness)	The boat captain can see the difference between the leaks of the boat and him/herself, the captain.

High Level of Mindfulness	Element of the sailboat	Metaphorical translation
The individual pays attention to personal weaknesses rather than avoiding, ignoring, or denying them.		The boat captain can pay attention to the leaks of the boat, rather than avoiding, ignoring, or denying them.
The individual is aware of his/her strengths and the feelings that accompany strengths use.	Sails (strengths)	The captain pays careful attention to his sails.
The individual can detect when he/she is overusing strengths.		The captain can detect when he must lower the sails.
The individual can detect when he/she is underusing strengths.		The captain can detect when he must hoist the sails.
The individual can notice positive events in life, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.	Weather (events)	The captain can notice good weather conditions, even if they are minor, such as a silver lining behind the clouds.
When facing challenging times, the individual can see his/her control limits and accept what cannot be changed.		When facing difficult weather conditions, the captain can act when possible and let go of things beyond his control.
In a social context, the individual pays full attention to the other person(s) and stays connected to the present moment.	Other boats (social relationships)	When among other captains, the captain pays full attention to the other captain(s) and stays connected to the present part of the journey.
The individual listens to others without judgment.		The captain listens to other captains without judgment.
The individual can maintain a healthy balance between attention to goals and attention to the present moment.	Destinations (goals)	While sailing, the captain maintains a healthy balance between attention to the journey's destination and the present part of the journey.

REFERENCES

1. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10*, 144-156.
2. Bishop, S. R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N. D., Carmody, J., . . . Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 11,* 230-241.
3. Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84,* 822-848.
4. Lakey, C. E., Kernis, M. H., Heppner, W. L., & Lance, C. E. (2008). Individual differences in authenticity and mindfulness as predictors of verbal defensiveness. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *42*(1), 230-238.
5. Chiesa, A., & Serretti, A. (2009). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for stress management in healthy people: A review and meta-analysis. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 15,* 593-600.
6. Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 57,* 35-43.
7. Brown, K. W., Ryan, R. M., Loverich, T. M., Biegel, G. M., & West, A. M. (2011). Out of the armchair and into the streets: Measuring mindfulness advances knowledge and improves interventions: Reply to Grossman (2011). *Psychological Assessment, 23,* 1041-1046.
8. Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2004). Perils and promise in defining and measuring mindfulness: Observations from experience. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 11,* 242-248.
9. Dane, E. (2011). Paying attention to mindfulness and its effects on task performance in the workplace. *Journal of Management, 37,* 997-1018.
10. Glomb, T. M., Duffy, M. K., Bono, J. E., & Yang, T. (2011). *Mindfulness at work*. In J. Martocchio, H. Liao, & A. Joshi (Eds.), *Research in personnel and human resource management* (pp. 115-157).
11. Davidson, R. J. (2010). Empirical explorations of mindfulness: Conceptual and methodological conundrums. *Emotion, 10,* 8-11.
12. Safran, J. D., & Segal, Z. V. (1990). Interpersonal process in cognitive therapy. Lanham, MD, US: Jason Aronson.
13. Shapiro, S. L., & Carlson, L. E. (2009). *The art and science of mindfulness: Integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*.
14. Detloff, W. K., & Deikman, A. J. (1982). *The Observing Self; Mysticism and Psychotherapy*.
15. Hayes, S. C., Follette, V. M., & Linehan, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioral tradition*. Guilford Press.
16. Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

17. Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K., Wilson, K. G., Bissett, R. T., Pistorello, J., Toarmino, D., ... & McCurry, S. M. (2004). Measuring experiential avoidance: A preliminary test of a working model. *The Psychological Record*, *54*, 553-578.

18. Marx, B. P., & Sloan, D. M. (2005). Peritraumatic dissociation and experiential avoidance as predictors of posttraumatic stress symptomatology. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *43*, 569-583.

19. Roemer, L., & Orsillo, S. M. (2005). An acceptance-based behavior therapy for generalized anxiety disorder. In *Acceptance and mindfulness-based approaches to anxiety* (pp. 213-240). Springer, Boston, MA.

20. Tull, M. T., Gratz, K. L., Salters, K., & Roemer, L. (2004). The role of experiential avoidance in posttraumatic stress symptoms and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and somatization. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, *192*, 754-761.

21. Wegner, D. M. (1994). Ironic processes of mental control. *Psychological review*, *101*, 34.

22. Alberts, H. J., Schneider, F., & Martijn, C. (2012). Dealing efficiently with emotions: Acceptance-based coping with negative emotions requires fewer resources than suppression. *Cognition & Emotion*, *26*, 863-870.

23. Marcks, B. A., & Woods, D. W. (2005). A comparison of thought suppression to an acceptance-based technique in the management of personal intrusive thoughts: A controlled evaluation. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *43*, 433-445.

24. Borders, A., Earleywine, M., & Jajodia, A. (2010). Could mindfulness decrease anger, hostility, and aggression by decreasing rumination?. *Aggressive Behavior: Official Journal of the International Society for Research on Aggression*, *36*, 28-44.