

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 122: The Magic of Mindfulness

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Hello, boys and girls and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss Show. This is an inbetweenisode, a short little morsel, a tidbit for your mind that will hopefully help you kick off a great weekend, or a week. If you want the longer interview format where I talk to people like Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Josh Waitzkin who is considered a chess prodigy, General Stanley McChrystal, etc., about their habits and routines, then you can find all of those at fourhourworkweek.com/podcast. But this is going to be a wee bit smaller, and it's going to discuss mindfulness.

Much of what I usually talk about is effectiveness; doing the right things and then doing things rightly, in that order, so effective and efficient. We'll get into a bit of that but we're going to talk about, like I mentioned, mindfulness. What that means is up for debate, depending on who you ask but let's define it as a present state awareness that helps you to be nonreactive, and I'll get into why that's important.

But before we even get into it, I will of course list out a number of tools that I've found very helpful. But the question is why do I think it's important? That's because it doesn't come naturally to me, and that is a huge handicap in life. For any Type A personality or someone who is hardwired that way, working on achievement is really easy. But we tend to do it, of course, by working harder. This isn't the first place we should focus. As good old Abe Lincoln, who's misquoted on the internet everywhere but I think this is a proper one has said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening the axe."

So perhaps we should spend more time sharpening our axe, the most important axe – our mind – before acting indiscriminately, which of course is a form of laziness. Mindfulness helps you to complain less, appreciate more, react less, and ultimately do more of the important stuff. What's very fascinating, though, about mindfulness so just being very focused on and aware of the present state, moment which includes your emotions, your reactions, etc. that it works in the opposite. In other words, if you complain less, you develop more mindfulness. If you appreciate more, you develop more mindfulness. So it is a two way street, and that gives you many more options for developing this skill that most people limit to, say, meditation which the vast majority of people hate and feel like they fail at so they don't do it.

So let's get started. Some of these are macro, meaning I do them once a year or once a week, once a month, once a quarter and some of them are daily. We'll start with a really big one, the 21 day no complaint experiment.

This originally came across my purview because of Will Bowen, who at the time, at least, was a Kansas City minister who had recognized that word choice determines thought choice. Think about this for a second; it's very profound. But what he did is even more interesting. So word choice determines thought choice. And in fact, if there are people who believe that the consciousness and conceptual thinking develop along with vocabulary so if word choice determines thought choice, that therefore determines also emotions and actions.

But it's not enough to just decide you're going to stop using certain words you might overuse, though. You need to be conditioned. So if you fix the words, you fix the thoughts. How did Will do this? He created a purple bracelet. It was a simple bracelet, kind of like the Livestrong bracelets that were yellow back in the day. He would give these out to his congregation. Why would he do that? He would ask them to do a 21 day no complaint experiment. So any time they complained, they had to switch the bracelet to the other wrist and start the clock over.

This became hugely popular, spread via word of mouth and at last count that I checked out, there were 6 million of these bracelets floating around because of, in part, his congregation and then he wrote a book called *A Complaint Free World*, which is worth reading. But what is a complaint? This was an issue that I had with some of his descriptions. Because with his rules, he will ask you to switch wrists whenever you gossip, criticize or complain. But again, the definitions can be a bit vague.

He also requires you to switch wrists if you tell someone else if they're complaining. I think this is counterproductive because it's constructive criticism. So here's where I drew the line, and you can use a rubber band as I did for a long time for this, or a bracelet. I define complaining for myself as follows: describing an event or person negatively without indicating next steps to fix the problem. And I added profanity to the list because I was trying to curse less and emulate people like Matt Mullen, who is incredible and is one of the people who's been interviewed on this podcast.

What that means is if you say: I was standing in line at the post office and this fucking idiot took forever. That's a complaint. You start the clock over. If you say: I was at the post office; the guy in front of me took forever and I decided that from now on, I'm not going to go to the post office unless it is between 8 and 9:30 a.m., something like that, suggesting a fix; that is a pass. It's not ideal but it's a pass.

So the 21 day no complaint experiment, this will change your life if you even attempt it. Even if you get one week through, it will change your life. So try it out. And again, this is using not complaining to become more mindful because it works both ways.

The next one is something that I try to do once a quarter or so, but even once a year is very, very helpful. And that is practice poverty for a week.

This comes from stoicism, and I'll have a lot more to say about stoicism and Seneca in particular. But practicing poverty for a week – I'm going to paraphrase here but in the

words of Seneca would effectively be limiting yourself to the cheapest of food, the coarsest of dress, the most meager of an existence for a week, all the time asking yourself: is this the condition I so feared? It teaches you to value the things that you should value and to realize that the worst case scenario really isn't generally that bad.

This enables you, emboldens you to take risks or things that you might previously consider risks, like starting your own company, moonlighting, ending a relationship, starting a relationship, quitting your job, whatever it might be; if there's a financial component to it. You realize the downside really isn't that bad; it's basically going back to college. I think a lot of people in life spend their entire careers trying to get back to their quality of life that they had in college.

So what does practicing poverty mean? It can mean many things. For instance for me, I would take one pair of jeans, wear those all week with a cheap pair of Vans as shoes, maybe a white tee shirt – only white tee shirts like Hanes – and eat rice and beans for a week. You get to the end of the week and you're like wow, I actually saved a lot of cognitive load by not having to decide about these things. So there are benefits to that simplicity, as well.

Alright. So practice poverty for a week and read up on Seneca. I will be – top secret, don't tell anybody – I have 27 hours of audio related to Seneca – I think it's 27 – that is coming out very shortly. I'm super excited so keep your ears peeled for that.

The next one, the jar of awesome. This was not my idea. This was actually thanks to an ex-girlfriend who was a real sweetheart, is I'm sure still a sweetheart. She created something for me called the jar of awesome. This is because I'm very good at achievement and not always very good at appreciation.

This was a mason jar with “jar of awesome” in glitter on the side. Any time something really cool happened that I got excited about, to avoid my forgetting it next to immediately, because I tend to celebrate very briefly if at all, I should write it down on a slip of paper and put it in the top of this mason jar. And it really had a tremendous impact.

I kept it where I could see it, and it was a real mood elevator and emphasized the importance of appreciation if you want to have any real success, and I hate to use that word but it's appropriate here. Because if you only have achievement and you never appreciate the small wins, or the big things for that matter, and they have no duration, then it's a hollow victory if you could call it a victory at all. So if you don't want to have a jar with “jar of awesome” written on it, you could just take a huge exclamation point. Put an exclamation point on the side of a mason jar or something like that and then drop these things in. It's an easy practice and a fun practice and I think – I don't have kids but if I had kids of, I would also have them put things into the jar of awesome.

Next, this is a daily practice and I've spoken about it before. I talked about my morning routine so I won't go into great depth here but I meditate every morning. I failed, in my

mind, at trying meditating for ten years. I would try it for two or three days and get pissed off and quit. The method that worked for me was transcendental meditation, TM.org; you can check it out. There are things I don't like about their organization in terms of how they make you look at a picture of an Indian guy with a beard, and they give you the blah, blah, blah and charge a good amount of money.

But it was worth it for me because there was accountability and it was very secular after the fact. They focus on logistics and contingency plans a lot in the teaching. But something like Vipassana or otherwise could work very well. I meditate for 21 minutes each morning. I'm supposed to do it in the afternoon; I very rarely do. I do it right after getting up.

It's like a warm bath for your mind. People get all woo-woo about meditation. This is where you're sharpening the axe. What I find is if I take the 20 – and it's 21 minutes because I take 60 seconds just to fidget and be an idiot and get settled, and then I count the 20 as my session. If you take those 20 minutes, you will get, I would say – and this is obviously just spit balling – 20 to 30 percent more done that day of important things with 50 percent less stress. So it is a huge ROI on that time.

Even if, as is common for me, and I have an episode with Rainn Wilson, best known as Dwight from *The Office* coming out soon where we talk about meditation, even if you only focus on what you're focusing on – your breath or whatever – for 30 seconds, a minute in that 20 minute session, it is a successful session. If you want an easy way to get your foot in the door with this stuff, download one or both of the apps: Calm or Headspace and just start using guided meditations in the morning.

And you don't have to start with 20 minutes. Start with five minutes and do it consistently for five to seven days to establish the habit; then you can up the time. Okay, next. Morning pages or journaling in the morning. When I get up, I won't go through the whole morning routine because I've done that elsewhere but when I journal, which is very early in the morning after meditation – well, early in the morning meaning in my morning. I usually get up between 7:30 and 10:30 so not exactly Jocko Willink. Sorry Jocko; I'm working on it.

In any case, the Five Minute Journal, just buy one of these. Honestly, I have no financial stake in this and you could certainly try to replicate it yourself but having it in one bound book is very helpful. In effect, what you're doing is five minutes in the morning, five minutes before you go to bed. The a.m. piece is simply writing down three bullets for: I am grateful for... three things. What would make today great; one, two, three. Daily affirmations: I am, blank, blank.

And then at night, before you go to bed, three amazing things that happened today: one, two three: how could I have made today better? I have had friends reach out to me, or fans for that matter, who have listened to everything I've talked about for years and they say this was the big game changer for them.

Now, I have some recommendations because I found that the “I am grateful for... blank, blank, blank;” you tend to use the same things over and over again. My healthy family, or my wife, or my kids; whatever it might be. So I suggest that you write down a number of categories and that you insist that you have no two days where the items are exactly the same. This is something I haven’t talked about before but I think this could be very helpful.

So in the Five Minute Journal, or in your morning pages if you use that type of approach, and you can just search for a blog post called “What my Morning Journal Looks Like, Ferriss,” and you’ll see what mine looks like for morning pages; a little bit different.]

When you’re doing this list of items or things that you’re grateful for, I would recommend four different categories. The first is a relationship, an old one that really helps you in some way or that you valued. Okay, relationship is No. 1. I tend to try to pick an old one because it forces you to go through the memory banks a bit.

No. 2 is an opportunity you have today. Perhaps that’s just an opportunity to improve, opportunity to go to work; it doesn’t have to be something extremely unique but an opportunity that you have today that you’re grateful for. No 3: something great that happened or that you saw yesterday. No.4 is something simple near you, and this was actually a recommendation from Tony Robbins. You can listen to my episode with him for a lot more on his baits. In other words, they can’t all be my career, the this, the that; these big abstractions or the gigantic items.

You want to get good at appreciating the small things because the small things are the big things. And if you don’t notice the small things, the tendency is also to not fully appreciate or be present with the large things. So something simple near you, or simple like the cloud outside the window, the coffee that you’re drinking, the pen that you might have; whatever it might be, something really small and simple, or I should say just simple.

So I’ll go through that again. When you’re putting down your list of things you’re grateful for, and even if you just did this instead of the five minute journal thing, it would be extremely valuable. 1.) An old relationship that helped you a lot. 2.) An opportunity you have today. 3.) Something great that happened yesterday, or something good. 4.) Something simple near you. Okay? That’s it.

The next step which is part of this exercise for me, and I believe I also go this from the same ex-girlfriend – that’s a longer story; I’m not going to get into it right now but she gave me a lot of good advice.

This next step was thanking one person per day. So in this case, I have developed the habit of thinking of, say, teachers who helped me in high school or friends who helped me when I was a kid or who were close to me. And then reaching out to them; trying to track them down on Facebook or otherwise. Send them an email. Give them a call. Leave a voicemail just telling them how much you appreciate them, or that you love them if you

really want to go for it. That alone will improve your quality of life dramatically. What I've found, and I'm not necessarily hardwired for what I would call happiness of self reported well being, is if you don't know how to make yourself happy, make somebody else happy. And guess what? That will generally increase your self reported level of happiness.

Okay, three more and then we're out of here. The net one is something I started doing about two weeks ago that I have found very helpful. I had always been told if you're feeling anxious or you're feeling overwhelmed, just take ten deep breaths. It sounds ridiculous but ten deep breaths is actually a fucking lot.

I started treating myself to three breath breaks. This sounds so fucking ridiculous until you try it and you're like me and you might find it useful, or you'll just laugh at me and that's okay, too. If you find yourself getting wound up in any way, or anxious, or projecting forward into the future about the what-ifs, even if it's six hours later, I will take a three breath break .And that's it. You're just going to take three deep breaths and that's it. It is a fantastic pattern interrupt and anxiety reducer, at least in my experience.

Alright, the next one is a Chrome extension, actually; the momentum Chrome extension. This is something Matt Mullenweg introduced me to. It is a great way to prevent you from opening a million tabs on your browser and getting lost in the slipstream of noise on the internet, or just scattered focus, for that matter. This helps you return to the most important thing you're supposed to do that day, which you define each day.

When you open the browser or open a new tab, it will say: good morning Tim, blah, blah, blah. There's a beautiful photograph. Then it asks you to type in your most important task or the thing you should focus on for that day. You can check it out. Many of you have been a huge fan of that since I mentioned it some time back, or when Matt mentioned it.

The last one is a nightly review, and this comes back to the five minute journal. But what you could do is simply another list of things that you're grateful for. This sounds so hokey, and it sounds so clichéd and I am here to tell you it is very significant. Practicing gratitude, practicing compassion sounds so woo-woo, California, San Francisco, put a crystal on my forehead. But if you look at neuro imaging studies that have looked at specifically compassion meditation, there are some very, very interesting findings. Some of them correlate to psychedelic use in some ways, which is very cool. I'm going to talk about that in the Rainn Wilson interview, also, but this is the book ending of the evening.

So I mentioned the five minute journal. You could just keep it simple and get one, honestly. Go online and it will save you a lot of time. Or you can just do, as I mentioned in the beginning, the a.m. check-in and write those things down, and then the p.m. check-in. Now, in the five minute journal, it's three amazing things that happened today... one, two, three. And then how could I have made today better? You could just make that a list of two or three or four things that you're grateful for that happened that day, that you saw that day, that you experienced that day, that you had an opportunity to engage with in some way that day.

Ladies and gents, those are some of the things that I use to cultivate mindfulness as a practical, tactical tool for being more effective, more efficient, and more appreciative. And like I mentioned, focusing on developing this present state awareness, which is done with conditioning, with practices, exercise, like I mentioned some of those I use regularly.

And it helps you to complain less, appreciate more, react less, and ultimately do more of the important stuff and enjoy yourself while you are doing it. So I hope that is helpful. The show notes may not exist for this particular episode because I think it was pretty straightforward. But you can find show notes from all the other episodes and so on at fourhourworkweek.com/podcast or just go to fourhourworkweek.com, all spelled out, and click on podcast. And of course, as always, thank you so, so much for listening. It means a lot to me and I love the feedback so please let me know on Twitter or Facebook, but Twitter's usually better @TFerriss, T-F-E-R-R-I-S-S.