

Finding Peace No Matter What Life Throws Your Way

A simple idea makes the difference between continuing to struggle with stress and leaving it behind. Happiness does not depend on your circumstances.

Nor do peace, joy, or contentment. These are available to you in any circumstance, no matter how seemingly trying or disappointing.

It's a natural human tendency to believe that, if only things were different, we could find contentment and peace. If we just had a little more money, less pain, a better relationship, a longer future... While it may be easier to feel content when you're rested, healthy, surrounded by people who adore you, and without pain, these things aren't requirements for contentment. Many wealthy, physically healthy people are depressed and suicidal, while plenty of people who are paraplegic live full and happy lives confined to a wheelchair.

The source of happiness isn't circumstances—it's how you interpret them. From one moment to the next, your mind is constantly evaluating your circumstances, giving them a 'thumbs-up' or a 'thumbs-down.' Your mind is particularly good at comparing your circumstances—your job, house, spouse, kids, education, health, and retirement account—to those of others. When your mind decides that you come up short, stress and anxiety result.

Some people call the tendency of the mind to constantly judge and compare 'monkey mind.' Imagine a chimp jumping from branch to branch, mischievous and overactive, always stirring up trouble. That's an apt description of the way your mind works.

This is not to say that your mind isn't useful – it is. Especially if you earn your living with brainpower, your mind has served you very well in some ways. But your day-to-day stress and anxiety arises from believing what your mind tells you about your life. "I don't have enough." "I'm not as good at that as my sister is." "I'll never find another boyfriend." "I'm too old/young/unattractive/unhealthy/you name it."

Emotions inevitably arise in response to your thoughts. "I'll never have another boyfriend, so I feel sad." "I didn't get that new job, so now I feel hopeless." If your mind's interpretation of the situation changes, your emotions will, too. "I may never have another boyfriend, but I have great friends." "I didn't get that new job, so there must be another opportunity for me somewhere else."

Here's an example: A forty year old woman has been at home with her kids for ten years and wants to reenter the work force. If she believes her mind, which is focusing on her lack of recent experience, the poor job market, and the skill of her competitors, she may feel anxious and hopeless. On the other hand, if she notices her worried thoughts but doesn't allow them to hook her emotionally, she'll realize something like this: "I'm afraid that re-entering the job market will be hard, but that doesn't mean I can't do it." She acknowledges her worried mind **without** believing its negative messages.

When you believe your mind's negative thoughts, becoming a slave to its views and the feelings that arise in response, unhappiness follows like the night follows the day. It's a natural tendency to believe your mind, too. We all tend to believe that our thoughts are the same thing as we are, that our thoughts define us.

What do you do instead of believing your mind? You observe it.

Try it right now. Stop reading for moment. What thoughts arise? They might be a grocery list, an awareness of tension in your neck and shoulders, an idea for dinner tonight, a remembering of something you have to do later—anything and everything.

When you first start paying attention to your thoughts, they often seem like shadows barely glimpsed, rushing through a dark hall. No sooner do you start to recognize one than the next one scurries by. It's less important that you identify each thought than that you notice them passing by without 'hooking' you. Noticing that your thinking about making a grocery list is different than picking up a pen and making one. Noticing that your thinking about the balance in your checking account is different than deciding to go out and splurge on a new cell phone.

Noticing your thoughts implies that there is a part of you that exists outside the mind, able to observe it. Many names exist for the 'you' that watches your monkey mind: soul, essence, witness, observer, consciousness, awareness, inner self. No matter what you call it, this aspect of you is separate from your mind, able to witness its activity impartially.

You are more than your mind—and connecting with the observing part of you is the secret to finding peace in every circumstance. There is a world of difference between these two statements: "My mind is giving me negative messages about myself because I lost my job" and "I'm a loser."

Developing a daily habit of noticing the actions of your mind is very helpful if you seek a more peaceful existence. Regular meditation practice can help with this. Meditation is a powerful tool for quieting the obsessive activity of your mind

Meditation of any kind helps you experience that you do exist apart from your thoughts. Particularly if you tend to have negative thoughts and often feel badly about yourself, it can be a very validating and powerful experience to realize that you are not your thoughts.

Meditation can be traditional, as in sitting with your eyes closed. You can also use mindfulness meditation: giving whatever you're doing your complete attention, focusing intently on the feel/sound/smell of it. For example, if you're peeling an orange, feel its heft in your hand, observe the color, smell it. Focus on nothing but the orange for the entire time that you're peeling it. If you get distracted, simply bring your attention back to the orange.

If you find it hard to sit still, try a walking meditation. Focus only on the sound of your feet as they hit the earth, the feel of the ground under your feet, the way your muscles feel as you stride. When you get distracted, bring attention back to your feet, your legs, the way your toes feel in your shoes.

Here are some other ways you can increase your awareness of your monkey mind.

- Post a note on your bathroom mirror, refrigerator, or any other place you pass by several times a day. *What is my monkey mind up to? Notice the mind. I am more than my mind.* Find a phrase that works to remind you to watch yourself thinking.
- Practicing noticing the actions of your mind whenever you stop at a red light, go to the bathroom, watch a TV commercial, or some other regular, recurring event.
- Whenever you feel badly about yourself or your situation, ask what your monkey mind is saying to you. *You're fat. People don't really like you. This is never going to work out.* Remind yourself that you are **not** your mind and counter these thoughts with more positive ones. *I care about my body. I am lovable. I can handle whatever comes.*
- Tell someone close to you about this idea and ask her to point out when your monkey mind seems to be overtaking you. She can gently ask, "You seem to be feeling down today. What's your monkey mind saying to you?"
- Even if you do nothing else, start to notice the negative messages that your monkey mind gives you about yourself, your life situation, and your health

Meditation takes practice, but the goal is to reach the place of stillness that you've experienced for fleeting moments before. Turning a corner on a hike and seeing a spectacular natural view or seeing your new baby for the first time, everything in your mind stops for a moment and you just ARE. This peaceful and still state of mind frees you, if only for a moment, from the stress of your wandering thoughts. It is a place to escape from the 'monkey mind' and experience the depth and worthiness that you have inside.

When you turn that corner or gaze upon your precious baby, the immediate tendency of the monkey mind is to jump in and chatter: "Oh, but it isn't as pretty as the place we saw last year" or "I wonder how much she weighs." Meditation teaches you to quiet the monkey mind and rest in that place of stillness. There, freed from being a slave to your mind, you touch the joy that's always available to you. .

For more information, you can read *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle.

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