

Being ‘purposely present’ in uncertain times

This article explores the helpfulness of being ‘purposely present’ to avoid getting swept along with the collective anxiety as Covid-19 becomes increasingly global. It comes from a place of acknowledgement that we can’t control the news or other people’s reactions; we only have control over ourselves and how we respond.

Where is your mind?

Most of us have probably noticed ourselves more future orientated than usual, getting caught up in the ‘What-ifs,’ weaving a story about what might happen and perhaps feeling more anxious over the last few weeks. This is normal with what’s happening in the world around us and of course, future planning and thinking about precautions is useful but it’s the rumination in times of uncertainty that is troublesome for us. Being ‘purposely present’ means intentionally bringing yourself back to this moment rather than getting caught up in unhelpful thinking patterns. When we are worrying about the future, we are operating from the part of our nervous system which causes a state of hyper-arousal. It’s from this place that we tend to react rather than respond, things feel more overwhelming and out of our control. When we are more present focused, we slow things down for ourselves, we move into the part of our nervous system that helps us relax and we make much better choices.

Taking Notice

Awareness is key. When you notice that you are caught up in worrying or catastrophising, your body will often give you signs that help you recognise this. Your heart may beat a little faster, you may feel breathless, sweaty, fidgety or have that ‘butterflies in the tummy’ feeling. This is your anxiety signature, it’s different for everyone and it’s helpful to get to know yours so that you can make a choice to be ‘here.’

Purposely present techniques

You might like to tune into your breath from time to time or drop into your body by breathing into places of tension and inviting these areas to relax. Tuning into ‘the soundscape’ – being aware of the sounds around you is another way of being present. Be aware that when you practice these things your mind will wander as all minds do, the skill is to notice where it went and gently bring your focus back to where you want to place your attention, over and over. You might like to try this for a short period of time during the day, sometimes setting a timer can help you to mind the time.

It might be helpful to bring yourself back to the present by simply noticing your feet in contact with the ground. Naming the emotion (s) that are here in any given moment helps us to not get wrapped up in its story and stay present too. Acknowledging what you are thankful for, connecting fully with others, offering random acts of kindness are other things that you can try to connect with the present. Engaging your senses also helps you to be in the moment as this helps you to focus on your interaction with your environment, savouring your food, even just for one mouthful is a good way to do this. Adopting a ‘one-pointed focus’ on anything that you are doing in the now helps you move from indulging the ‘What-ifs’ to connecting with the ‘What-is,’ helping you to feel more in control.

Take a Breathing Space

As a meditation teacher I share with my class, a ‘mini – meditation’ called a Breathing Space. This technique helps us to press reset, it’s like taking an internal selfie to ‘check in’ with ourselves. It combines some of the ideas above into one exercise. Punctuating your day with this strategy can be an interesting experiment. To do this, make a choice to pause, take a breath, connect with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgement and then:

- ∞ Notice where you feel the breath most obviously and let your attention settle there. Notice the inbreath and the outbreath.
- ∞ Dropping your attention into the body, notice any body sensations.
- ∞ Turn your awareness to your thoughts – what are you telling yourself right now? Registering not reacting.
- ∞ Name the emotion/s that are here.
- ∞ Tuning into the senses: what do you notice in your visual field? What is here to be physically felt right now (touch of your clothes on your skin, feet in contact with the floor etc....), what can you hear, smell and taste?
- ∞ Now making a choice to carry on with your day

Fitness for the mind

All this is a bit like taking your mind to the gym. As with physical fitness you’ll need to practice. At first try your ‘purposely present’ strategies when you are not feeling overwhelmed. You’ll literally begin to re-train your mind, carve out new neural networks in your brain and the more that you do this the stronger these skills become. This makes the possibility of creating a pause, to respond rather than to react more available to you in times of overwhelm.

Meditating regularly helps to cement these neurological adaptations. There are many apps to help with establishing this, they have recordings and courses available on them; Insight Timer, Headspace and Calm to name a few.

A Gift?

Perhaps choosing to be present on purpose is indeed a ‘present’ or kind gift to ourselves in these difficult times. Cultivating being ‘purposely present’ may become a life-skill that helps you to find more stability and spaciousness in your day to day life even after this period of uncertainty has passed. If you are up for it, experiment with the strategies shared here that feel useful and fit with you, choosing to bring yourself into the present whenever you need to and explore your experience with curiosity.

You might even like to try a Breathing Space right now before you continue with your day.



This article is written by Claire Holmes who is Head of Counselling at Tanglin Trust School and a Certified Mindfulness teacher.