

# 1

## Towards Renewing the Self

This chapter will present a general introduction of the upcoming chapters and will discuss how our life may be filled with mindlessness or mindfulness. I will define and examine mindlessness versus mindfulness and explore how they can lead us to different paths. Our discussion will highlight how mindfulness may enhance one's quality of living, wellness and well-being. The chapter argues that through a shift from mindlessness to mindfulness, one may experience a new mode of living with novelty, empowerment, and tranquility. The chapter will also point out the role of language in developing mindfulness or mindlessness and will demonstrate the relationship between language and therapy in mindful or mindless contexts.

When you perform day-to-day activities, such as shopping, speaking, driving, and even reading the lines in this book, your mind is constantly switching between different states. One dominant mode is mindlessness, in which your mind is processing information without conscious thinking, without much deliberation or contemplation. When you are in a mindless state, you may automatically recall some information from the past and may not be able to pay attention to what lies in front of you at this moment.

When mindless, people act like an autopilot: they don't reflect on what they are doing. They simply do what they have been programmed to do. Programming can occur through parenting, schooling, media, upbringing, culture, etc. When we are programmed to do something, we usually don't pay attention to the content; we merely go by the rules of the program.

People cannot live in the moment when they live mindlessly. Mindlessness prevents one from focusing on the moment. With the reign of mindlessness, one is deprived of experiencing the here and now. He/she is imprisoned through his/her mindset with a concentration on the past experiences.

If you are biting an apple at this moment, you may not savor the taste right now in the moment; your experience of now is blocked by the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements of your past: how apples tasted to you in the past, the first time that you had an apple, etc.

Thoughts and questions from your past, such as “Who stole my apple?,” “Why didn’t our garden have apples when I was growing up?” color and take control of the present experience. This focus on the past may be called top-down processing and prevents us from experiencing the present moment.

Mindlessness imposes certain modes of thinking and expressiveness: One gets stuck in automatic and rule governed behaviors. The rules are unquestionably accepted and there would be no rooms for exploring the alternative modes of acting or thinking.

If you had gone to people fifty years ago and had described the idea of an iPhone, the people would have most likely considered your idea as impossible based on their existing mindset. Their rules, based on their understanding, would have most likely nullified thinking about the possibility of creating an iPhone and its features.

When mindful, people experience bottom-up processing (here and now) and thus can minimize the impact of the past and maximize the accessibility to what lies in the moment. The possibility, hence, can be expanded.

The possibility does not abide by the rules of possibility in accordance with the top-down processing. In other words, the possibility can go beyond what people’s mindsets consider as possible.

Mindfulness unfolds itself when one is proactively engaged in here and now. Thus, the essence of mindfulness lies in the presence and a focus on the moment. This focus needs to be deliberate, intentional, open, flexible, curious, and novel. This suggests that in order to be mindful, one needs to intentionally and deliberately concentrate in the present moment while exploring curiously and openly the novel aspects of the here and now.

For example, when you look at an object, say, a bottle, your mind automatically enlists the object as a bottle and once you look at it as merely a bottle, you won’t be able to see it as anything else except a bottle. The

object, however, can be so many other things including a bottle. It can be a pencil holder, a flower vase, and so forth. We categorize it as a bottle due to our previously built system of naming and classification. When we are mindful, our statements become more flexible: Our sentence is changed into “This can be so and so” instead of “this is...”

To put it simply, to be mindful, one needs to have the intention of focusing on the moment.

Mindfulness may often be associated with meditation. In other words, meditation may facilitate the process of implementing mindfulness.

Meditation based mindfulness which is mainly characterized through the works of John Kabat-Zinn and is also associated with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) would highlight the role of meditation in achieving mindfulness (see for instance, Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

In the meantime, there is a second version of mindfulness which I have called “Langerian Mindfulness” or “Critical Mindfulness.” This second version goes back to the forty year long standing experimental research of Ellen. J. Langer at Harvard University.

Langerian mindfulness proposes and propounds that one can become mindful without the use of meditation. Mindfulness, in this case, occurs when one explores novelty in the present moment. (For more specifics, see Fatemi, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

Critical mindfulness introduced a focus on intrapersonal, interpersonal, educational, social, and health implications of mindfulness (Langer, 2000, 2009; Langer & Abelson, 1974; Langer & Piper, 1987; Langer, 1997; Rodin & Langer, 1977).

In the upcoming chapters, I will discuss each of these implications and their practical therapeutic applications.

In different forms of mindfulness including mediation-based mindfulness and Langerian *critical mindfulness*, the goal is to develop an intentional, flexible, open, and presence-oriented attention.

One of the first things to consider for understanding Langerian mindfulness is to understand the role and the implications of our mindsets. Our mindsets can influence our life and can create different styles of living. Our mindsets can operate mindlessly or mindfully.

In a series of experiments, Hsu, Chung and Langer (2013) demonstrated that women who think they look younger after having their hair colored and cut displayed a decrease in blood pressure. Moreover, when they were photographed (and their hair was cropped out of the pictures), a group of independent raters described them as younger than women in a control group.

In another study, Langer and her colleagues noted that baldness is a cue that triggers the use of old-age labels. They found that men who go bald prematurely view an “older self” and thus age faster. The intriguing problem is that prematurely bald men also have an excess risk of being diagnosed with prostate cancer and coronary heart disease than men who do not go prematurely bald (see Hsu, Chung, & Langer, 2013).

More interestingly, had two groups of participants use a flight simulator. One group was told to regard themselves as Air Force pilots and were given flight suits to wear as they guided their simulated flights. A second group was told the simulator was broken and that they should just pretend they were flying a plane. After the exercise, the members of each group were given an eyesight test. Those who piloted the simulated flight performed 40 percent better on the eye exam than those in the control group.

On explaining the flight simulator study, indicated that “mind-set manipulation can counteract presumed physiological limits.” A change of mindset can give rise to renewing oneself and “to return the control of our health back to ourselves”.

*Perspective* is of great significance in understanding Langerian mindfulness. A change of perspective can create a new course of action where responsibility, responsiveness, proactivity, choice, and empowerment can give rise to a novel mode of being.

The proactive nature of mindfulness may begin with re-examining the mind-sets. Plenty of empirically based experiments indicate that when placed in a state of *mindlessness*, people lose their creativity and agency and merely succumb to a passive mode of reactivity (see Langer, 1989, 2000, 2005, 2009).

Mindfulness enhancement would help people notice their power of creativity, their choices in making a decision, their efficacy in dealing with challenges, and their novelty in improving their performance (see Fatemi, 2016b; Fatemi, Ward, & Langer, 2016).

In other words, mindlessness would deprive people of questioning the dominant discourses of their lives whether these discourses have been brought to them through their upbringing, schooling, culture, environment, or even therapeutic discourses. So, people may mindlessly follow the patterns of stories created for them by others without realizing their own power to change the story.

Discourse here refers to how things are exhibited and displayed. A discourse of depression, for instance, centers around negativity, helplessness, despair, and disappointment. If someone is dominated by the discourse of depression, he/she constantly thinks about what is missing in

his/her life: he/she does not pay any attention to his/her resources at all. The point is not to deny the existence of a problem; the point is to show how much a problem may broaden its intensity for one's life.

The problem with mindlessness is that it does not allow people to see anything except the direction given to them though a mindset: once you get yourself locked into some information, you may not be able to see anything else except the given information.

In other words, when one is locked in an information, one is not looking for alternative ways of looking at the subject of the experience. This may help us understand how in a mindlessness-based phenomenology, statements and propositions are considered absolute whereas in a mindful state, the statements and propositions are processed in a conditional format. The conditional mode would allow clients understand the tentativeness of the proposition and that would help them experience flexibility and openness.

People can be subjugated to dominant therapeutic discourses too. Once they are labelled as depressed, for example, they would move in line with that dominant discourse: they keep themselves distant from people; they listen to sad music and people around them see them as depressed too and act towards them accordingly.

Langerian mindfulness challenges many of the domineering psychotherapeutic discourses and questions their universality. Therapy can be done mindlessly too: Langerian mindfulness questions the premises and assumptions of so many therapeutic systems.

From a Langerian mindfulness perspective, clients need to be understood in their unique place and position: their voice needs to be discovered.

Mindfulness here requires understanding the specific contexts of the action, behaviors, feelings, and stories of a client.

Understanding people's context would require an in-depth exploration of their uniqueness. To examine the context would also take place through the rigorous and mindful understanding of the client's language: *what is it that clients tell themselves and others, what is maximized or minimized in their stories, how does their language contribute to their empowerment or disempowerment, how is their language influenced by a macro language coming from their culture, upbringing, education, political and economic system? What is the language that they have been using or what language have they been subscribed to use?*

Labels bring mindlessness (see Langer, 2009). Clients can be mindlessly subjected to a passive mode of living through complying with

labels attributed to them either in macro or micro levels. If you describe yourself as incompetent, your self-talk will start paying attention to what you can't do and what you fail to do.

Mindlessness keeps on repeating a language without reflecting on the content of the language. Mindfulness highlights the significance of language in creating realities for us.

Language plays a pivotal role in creating mindfulness (see Fatemi, 2018). Language is not just an instrument or a device to make transactions: it entails a mode of being. When mindless, people are incarcerated within a language that seems to be unchangeable and unavoidable. For people with depression, this language produces sadness, fear, anxiety, and helplessness (Davidson, 2000).

This language unfolds itself in the paramount emotions of people with depression. The use of a counterproductive language with recursive negative emotions would impede the process of deconstructing the language from the user of the language: the person strongly identifies himself/herself with the language and he/she cannot disengage himself/herself from the emotions generated by the underlying negative emotions.

Langerian mindfulness starts off with helping the clients notice perspectives that may not be available in the repertoire of the person with depression.

One is encouraged to explore possibilities of alternative modes of perspectives. When depressed or stressed, people experience negative interpretation bias: they see more negative aspects than any positive sides. This may lead to their acting from a single perspective that does not allow them to see any other modes of possibilities except what they are enmeshed in.

Langerian mindfulness commencement point lies in delineating the relationship between one's perspective and one's mode of existence. Mindlessly lived stories do not leave any room for attention to variability. Helping clients understand how perspectives can be limited and limiting would allow them to see the implications of their phenomenologically lived stories: if you have been living with a story of helplessness and you have been repeating that story with you, your lived experiences would have been most likely filled with helplessness.

Stories entail *a what* and *a how*. In discussing the what of stories, clients examine the events, their sequential order, their syntagmatic (chain) analysis and focus on what is it that has occurred namely the content of their stories.

In focusing on how stories are told, people are encouraged to fathom and reflect on the discourse of their stories: How the stories are told, their modes of display, their modes of presentation are pronounced here.

In understanding the differences, people learn to see the discourse of their own stories (how they are told) and its implications. Stories' discourse can be limiting, oppressive, and paralyzing.

Langerian mindfulness would help clients realize how the content and the discourse of their stories can mindlessly hamper the process of looking into the unnoticed features of their stories.

When fraught with depression, anxiety, fear, and doubts, people may neglect the realm of alternative possibilities that may be available to them. Mindlessness would limit and circumscribe the horizon of possibilities by narrowing down the agency behind people's stories.

Langerian mindfulness would help clients understand the process of separating themselves from the dominant discourse of their stories. This separation is facilitated through an increase of mindfulness where the client is encouraged to see the difference between what he/she is experiencing as a problem and his/her power of making a choice to act differently towards the problem.

Clients' perceptual, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional experiences learned from the past may limit, distort, and constrict their phenomenological access to the present moment. Therefore, they may be emotionally or cognitively blocked to see any other alternative way of looking at the story that they have lived through.

Hence the mindfulness I am discussing here brings a shift of attention where clients can get out of their socially and culturally constructed world and look for modes that may have been easily unnoticed.

When people are mindlessly drowned into accepting the un-changeability of their stories, they abide by the frequently repeated discourse of the same stories. In other words, if you keep on telling yourself that you will never learn math since your father was not good at math, you will not allow yourself to see any other perspectives except the perspective that indicates you are not good at math.

Practicing mindfulness allows people to realize that anxiety and depression can be choices one *may* accept. Deep down the foundational prerequisites of the mindful management of depression and anxiety, there lies the power of *choices*.

One way to facilitate the shift of attention for exploring the possibility of multifarious layers and features in a story can transpire through reading and examining stories. Stories can provide a rich platform through which one may come to realize the changeability of one's story. Art, in its broadest sense, can also provide a significant medium where the observer may become mindful of the constructional nature of his/her mode of living through the power of words, images, and discourse (see Langer, 2009).

In line with the value of understanding the importance of stories, Langerian mindfulness highlights the vitality of the deconstruction of stories. People may fail to express their lived story, or they are prevented from expressing their story or they are surrounded by people who insist on adopting a pretentious stance instead of relating and connecting to their story.

Stories appear to operate in a wide variety of infiltrating and indirect contexts: Unexpressed stories do not cease to operate; they appear in different levels of one's intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.

Langerian mindfulness underlines the role of non-judgmental, open, and flexible listening of therapists in helping clients to freely and comfortably express their lived stories. This is also associated with the therapists' attunement and inter-subjectivity and mindful presence where they help the clients experience a sense of empathy, support, and flexibility in their therapeutic relationships.

Along with the experiential presence in the therapeutic relationships, clients are encouraged to step outside the experience and observe their lived stories. This often happens through a combination of open questions where the clients are invited to examine and realize how their stories can be deconstructed into elements and features.

Through this *mindful deconstruction and decomposition*, clients are encouraged to describe the experience and see how that description may have an impact on their feelings and behaviors. The bottom line here is to help clients understand the *externalization* of the problem: they are not the problem; the problem is separate from them.

Through an increase of mindfulness, clients learn to see how mindlessness may have contributed to their identifying themselves with the problem. This may also take place through the therapists' explication of the role of internal vs. external attribution. An in-depth understanding of the role of attribution would help clients realize how their mindsets may impose a relationship where change is not possible.

Mindfulness help clients to break themselves free from the problem and realize their own power of control, sensibility, choice, and power in creating a new meaning, a new story for themselves. This may happen through a work of art or paying attention to stories, parables, metaphors, and poems where the act of noticing can turn out to be an art where the observer makes a discernment of his/her novelty in paying attention to multiple potential layers of a story.

Mindlessness paralyzes people's power of searching for otherwise in their stories (Fatemi, 2018). Mindlessness imposes a tunnel vision where the person is placed only in a circumscribing mode where possibilities

are denied. This denial would maximize the negativity, weak point, and problems in the person's life while ignoring, marginalizing, and neglecting his/her strengths.

Langerian mindfulness would facilitate the process of finding the dominant stories and their discourses and their power to dictate the impossibility of change, the certainty of the person's identification with the problem situations.

Challenging this position of certitude and certainty and calling for the fluidity of living in the moment through observing new things, Langer (2009) writes:

Certainty is a cruel mindset. It hardens our minds against possibility and closes them to the world we actually live in. When all is certain, there are no choices for us. If there is no doubt, there is no choice. When we are certain, we are blind to the uncertainties of the world whether we recognize it or not. It is uncertainty that we need to embrace (pp. 24–25).

The dialectical journey of noticing new aspects of one's life along with attention to variability would provide the clients to see how their stories can be changeable: There are dimensions, features, and aspects in the story that may not have been taken into consideration due to the heavy deluge of negatively induced mindlessness.

When depressed, people may be mindlessly and automatically embedded within the negative repertoire of their recollection, associations, etc. Langerian mindfulness would help clients examine the bright side of their life without denying the dark side. So, for a depressed person, the questions would be: *are there times in your life where you have not experienced what you are experiencing now? What does that suggest? If you have not been always at the mercy of what you are now, does that not suggest that the experience is not equated with you: you are not what you experience?* The goal is to help clients understand how mindlessness would lead people to equate themselves with their mindsets and thus lose their power of choices.

Through helping the clients explore novel aspects of their situation, we would invite clients to extend their quest, in their own stories, for locating positive sides. Deconstructing the dominant negative stories, their negative predilections and their effects would help clients understand that they can re-author their own story through implementing mindful creativity in constructing a new horizon of possibility.

Helping the clients in action to see the differences between mindlessness and mindfulness and their effects in giving rise to different modes of realities would serve as a preamble in illustrating the relationship between one's story and one's perspective.

Language plays a significant role in creating Langerian mindfulness. This mindfulness would help clients to be vigilant of the language that they can mindfully use and its impacts. Language may imprison or emancipate people as it can revitalize or paralyze people's power of choices.

A mindful openness towards art and its manifestations or a practical connectedness to stories may help people observe the subtle and rigorous impact of language in creating, shaping, transforming, and recreating realities.

A discovery of one's voice, its power and its impact unfold itself in the process of a mindful therapeutic conversation.

Helen Keller said, "Your success and happiness lie in you. External conditions are the accidents of your life, its outer trappings (1903, p. 110)."

## **Implications and Guidelines for Mental Health Professionals**

Understanding the theoretical and practical implementations of Langerian mindfulness would help psychotherapists to develop a more creative, caring, open, and meaningful relationship with their clients.

Applying Langerian mindfulness may facilitate the process of understanding the relationship between performative "I" and the reflective and reflexive "I". When you do a work of art, you are in your performative role (performative I), and when you reflect on what you are doing you become your reflective "I". Suppose that you are drawing a poster. When you are engaged in what you are doing you are experiencing your performative "I". When you sit back in your mind and watch what you are doing, you will experience your reflexive and your reflective "I". This will allow people to separate their thoughts from themselves. People may comfortably see the difference between them and the others but may not easily see the difference between them and their thoughts.

Langerian mindfulness would help people realize that they are not equated with their thoughts. We will elaborate this in the next chapter with examples.

Psychotherapists are invited to apply such mindfulness in helping clients to freely and comfortably express their lived experiences and stories.

Through increasing the power of mindful expressiveness, clients may learn to distinguish between the dominant story of their life and the often-ignored discursive layers of their narratives.

Voice is an essential component of implementing Langerian mindfulness. Therapists need to help clients look for “missing voices” in their story; to search for the unexpressed voices or the ones that have been lost in the dominant discourses of oppressive and disempowering narratives.

A change in language may lead to an existential transformation. Through a recondite implementation of Langerian mindfulness, clinicians need to help clients experience the infinite power of language in creating and constructing novel realities. Visual arts, poetry, films, stories, visualization can be creatively explored in the context of Langerian mindfulness to put this goal into effect. I will discuss and exemplify these applications in the upcoming chapters.

Understanding the difference between absolute propositions and conditional propositions can be a great tool to help clients examine how taken for granted assumptions may serve as a bid impediment in the way of their growth or recovery.

Clients may be invited to see and explore the differences between certitude and contingency and their psychological implications. If in looking at an object we come up with an assertion that this is a bottle of water, it espouses implications quite different from articulating that this can be a bottle of water. The former freezes reality of the object whereas the latter opens it up to numerous possibilities where the object can be so many things including a bottle of water amongst so many other things including a pencil holder, a vase, etc.

Understanding the difference would help clients to examine the realm of their possibilities beyond the given set of their assumptions. This would enable them to see how their choices can go beyond the established set of contexts that they are embedded in. This perceptiveness would help clients to see how social construction of realities can be revisited and can be deconstructed. On a personal level, it allows them to see how they can revamp their narratives and discover their own voice through distancing from the absoluteness of what they have been given and looking for alternative modes of composing their new narratives.

Therapists using Langerian mindfulness may encourage clients to see how paying attention to variability would allow them to deal with stressful situations in a more effective manner. Langerian mindfulness would argue that *no one is always anything*. For instance, no one is always depressed. There are times that one may be depressed or semi depressed or not depressed even when he/she has been labeled as depressed. The

question for a Langerian therapist to pose is: what are the circumstances that make you depressed and what are the situations or factors that can be elicited to make you not depressed? When our attention is mindlessly fixed at one thing and is not flexibly moving towards other possible scope of attention, we would get ourselves imprisoned into unquestionable positions. Questioning this unquestionability would emerge in the heart of Langerian mindfulness. Clients are encouraged to learn how learning about attention and its variability would help them see their power of managing their attention.

From a Langerian mindfulness perspective, anxiety is a choice. An increase of mindfulness and its creativity would help clients see how they can shift from an automatic mode or behavior namely mindlessness to mindfulness. This shift would illustrate how choices can be sensibly celebrated through an act of mindfulness and its call for exploring novel things. Clinicians using Langerian model can help their clients to examine moment by moment the possibility of making choices instead of abiding by an automatically learned behavior. Every morning, one may automatically go for an orange juice instead of pondering that this is a choice among so many other choices.

Therapists can teach clients to exercise the power of choices and see how choices are plentiful. According to Langerian mindfulness, paying attention to a thought is a choice. One can always choose not to choose this choice. Furthermore, one may choose to attend to the thought but can choose not to endorse the thought. With an increase of mindfulness and its components including noticing new things and increasing the experiential and phenomenological presence in the moment, one would be able to ascertain and acknowledge the power of agency namely the power of his/her choices over the context.

Clients can be forcibly lost in the meanders of pretentiousness. Langerian studies have demonstrated that even animals including Dolphin can tell the difference between an ostentatious mode of being and an authentic presentation. Teaching creative mindfulness would help clients to be in touch with themselves without being afraid or anxious. In doing so, Langerian therapists would help clients to discover the importance of their own agency instead of over-dependency on the good opinion of others.

When you can take off your watch and place it in front of your eyes, it vividly tells you that the act of separating the watch from you would suggest that you are not equated with your watch. Langerian therapists using creative mindfulness teach the clients to practice detaching their

thoughts and sensations from them. The detachment may indicate how an indulgence in one's own recursive thoughts would generate a subjective image where mindlessness resides. With an increase of creative mindfulness, clients may learn how to mindfully experience a detachment from their own subjectivity including their own thoughts, assumptions, and mindsets.

The following chapters will examine and discuss components of Langerian mindfulness and its therapeutic implications.

## Food for Thought

- 1) Make a list of your daily activities and explore how you may have done them mindlessly.
- 2) Select one or two of your activities and carry out the activity as mindfully as possible.
- 3) Think about the implications of mindfulness: how does it affect you, your feelings, and your behaviors.
- 4) Discuss how creativity can entail daily activities including your interaction with yourselves and others.
- 5) How does novelty help you to live in moment and experience the presence more effectively and proactively? Examples?

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