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## The ABC of Mindfulness

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Mindfulness can be a hugely impactful performance and health enhancing skill. The challenge is how to apply it when typically the situations in which it would prove most useful are fast-moving, complex, pressure-filled events where the stakes are high and the outcome critical.

The purpose of this small article is to give you a process that you can use to manage your energy at critical moments in the same way that first responders/medics use ABC. The ABC process reminds the practitioner where to put their attention, what is most important to pay attention to, in a medical emergency; Airways, Breathing, and Circulation. We will devise our own ABC but first some information on the concept of mindfulness.

### THE DEFINITION

Mindfulness is a concept and a practice that has been around for thousands of years. One of today's best-known meditation teachers, Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines mindfulness as paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment. Each of those three components really matter in any situation where how we perform is important. These are most frequently situations where pressure and the need for excellence are equally present.

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## IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

Let's start with, 'in the present moment.' Very often in situations where we are under some pressure our attention gets snagged on the future, "what if I run out of time," "what if they don't like it," "am I going to get away on time to pick up the kids," etc. The future—what might/could happen as a consequence of how I do right now. Alternatively, our attention, our thoughts, can get snagged on the past, "this took forever last time," "how come Bill didn't have to work on this," "we ran into so many problems last time," etc. None of these thoughts/images support our performance in the moment. In fact they are major distractors that increase stress.

Learning to perform at high levels, especially under pressure, is all about where you choose to put your attention in the moment

Do you put your attention on thoughts/images that help you perform your best, focused on what you are actually doing, or is your attention divided by concern with the outcome or your history or some other pressing demand?

The mind is a terrific storyteller. It makes up all kinds of stories about what has happened, what will happen; most of which are terribly inaccurate. They are interpretations of the truth, not the truth. They are not factual. One longtime meditation teacher called these stories 'subconscious gossip' and like gossip they may have a smidgen of truth, but mostly they are inaccurate.

The mind gets bored focusing on a single thing and so it naturally and frequently changes channels. It can be fascinated or get stuck on certain scenarios that serve no functional purpose. Mindfulness is about paying attention to what is *actually happening* in this moment. When you notice that your mind is making up stories or has wandered off to another topic you simply notice and bring it back. This leads us to...

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## IN A PARTICULAR WAY

We notice what we are thinking, and in a *non-judgmental way*, we redirect our focus to what we need to pay attention to. If you were meditating you would simply redirect your focus to your breath. In a performance situation we redirect our focus to what we are doing and the external cues necessary for us to do that very well.

The key here is to not engage with the internal gossip but to notice it and move your attention back to where it needs to be. Do not get fascinated with the story it is spinning, do not take it seriously. It is the mind's nature to make up things and to flit from topic to topic. It has boundless creativity fueled by fears, doubts, dreams and expectations. There is no point getting distracted by any of it. We simply notice the parade and redirect our attention to where we need to be.

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## ON PURPOSE

When we meditate we sit with the full intention of paying attention to a specific cue—eg. breath. We do it with intention but without criticizing or evaluating our process. This ability to observe without judgment relieves us of any tension. We make a conscious choice where we want to put our attention and we redirect when we notice it has jumped.

The same thing needs to be true *at those times when our performance really matters to us. We need to consciously check in with ourselves, notice what we are paying attention to and, if necessary, redirect, in a non-judgmental way our attention.*

In performance situations it is often sensations at the body level that can throw our performance off. We may notice our heart rate has increased or there is tightness in our chest or our breathing is rapid and shallow.

We may interpret these as omens of a poor performance. In reality all of these sensations and emotions have energy in them that can be very useful if it is redirected/invested in concentrating on the game/our performance.

It is a universal truth that things arise and things pass away. It's true for the leaves on the trees, mountains, and indeed our own lives. It is certainly true of our thoughts and it is also true of sensations and emotions that we are experiencing. Sometimes you might choose to simply observe your rapidly beating heart or the tightness in your chest. By sitting with it in the present moment and examining it you will see that it too changes and eventually diminishes... Then you simply redirect your attention back on to what you're doing.

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## THE ABC OF MINDFULNESS

Let's simplify this down. Here is a mindful procedure that you can use in performance situations.

### A IS AWARENESS

We check in with ourselves and notice what is going on. We do this in a nonjudgmental way. We may choose to label what we observe; 'afraid,' 'critical,' 'judging,' 'the future,' 'the past,' 'making things up,' etc.

### B IS FOR THE BREATH

We redirect our attention on to the breath and focus 100% on the air entering and leaving through our nostrils. We hold our attention on the point where air enters and leaves, the end of our nostrils. Because our attention can only be focused on one thing at a time this breaks us away from what we were thinking or the sensations in our body.

Biofeedback research suggests that breathing at a rate of six breaths a minute is ideal. That means each breath takes 10 seconds. It is also ideal the exhalation exceed in length the inhalation. Breathing in to a four second count and out to a six second count will automatically bring down arousal level.

### C IS FOR CHOOSE

After two or three breaths we redirect our attention on to what we need to pay attention to in order to perform well at this moment.

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This is very much a noticing that we are going in the wrong direction, a shift into neutral with the breath, and then redirecting ourselves back on course.

The late, great Yogi Berra once said. "*You can observe a lot by watching.*" Mindfulness is a lifelong practice that will pay huge dividends to those who take the time to become consciously competent at it.

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