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# Mindfulness 101: Brushing Up on Mindfulness in the New Year

By Scott L. Rogers

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The Super Bowl and New Year's resolutions have a few things in common. They each involve preparation and can generate excitement, hopes run high for both, and, often enough, by early February they're over. The ever-present consolation is that there's always next year.

Resolutions run the gamut from those that are health focused (diet, exercise, and sleep), to safety concerns (not texting while driving), to performance (becoming better organized and spending less time on technology), to the personal (being kinder to others, less hard on oneself, and a more attentive listener). All of these noble causes reflect good intentions, notwithstanding their often-short-lived status, year in and year out. In this month's column, we'll zero in on another resolution—one that has more recently emerged on the scene: to practice mindfulness, which, in addition to offering numerous benefits, may meaningfully influence the likelihood of the other resolutions coming to fruition. This column and countless others extol the benefits of practicing mindfulness; they will not be addressed here. Rather, we'll consider how to execute on the seemingly simple yet sometimes challenging resolution to sit for a few minutes each day and settle a little more fully into the present moment. You may find doing so akin to placing that crucial puzzle piece or figuring out the crossword puzzle answer after which the rest effortlessly falls into place.



## Brushing Teeth and Practicing Mindfulness

You probably do not need to resolve to brush your teeth two or three times each day, as that daily practice has become well established. It's a form of dental hygiene that once was of questionable value or unavailable and, with time and evidence, has become accepted and so routine it has become second nature. Tooth brushing, taken as a metaphor, can be helpful in developing and better understanding an often-misunderstood form of mental hygiene—mindfulness. In this month's column, we'll see if we might leverage the already established practice of brushing teeth to help implement and sustain a daily mindfulness practice.

There was a time when people did not brush their teeth. Today, doing so is a regular occurrence, with few giving it any thought. The physicist Richard Feynman, in his brilliant and playful manner of teaching, explained the difference between causation and correlation with the image of our planet rotating beneath the sun. Every day without fail, as a slow-moving sliver of the earth brightens longitudinally, people get out of bed and brush their teeth. Of course, sunlight doesn't cause people to brush their teeth; habit does.

Just as we care about our dental hygiene, we are learning the importance of caring for our mental hygiene. Below is a tip for practicing mindfulness, tethering it to brushing teeth, and a deeper look at the question of why we practice mindfulness, analogizing

it to the question of why we brush our teeth.

## A Practice Tip

It can be challenging to set in place a new routine. But rather than it be something about the desired routine that gets in the way, the difficulty can reside in the displacement of what otherwise would take place, for we are creatures of habit. So, rather than fight against the current of habit, let's piggyback off of it.

Just as people brush their teeth for varying lengths of time (the American Dental Association recommends at least two minutes, twice a day), so, too, people practice mindfulness for varying lengths of time. And just as some brushing is better than no brushing, some practice is better than none. For those who do not practice on a regular basis and wish to do so, practicing for two or three minutes once a day is a powerful start—makes for a noble resolution—and whether or not the length of time grows, if a daily routine endures, it's a win.

The basic instruction is even simpler than brushing:

- 1 Sit.
- 2 Lower or close your eyes.
- 3 Attend to the sensations of the breath (or of another object such as your hands or ambient sounds).
- 4 Return attention to the object when you notice your mind wandering.
- 5 When you are finished, smile.

While it does not matter whether you practice before or after brushing, select one window of opportunity and keep to it. You can use a timer, keep your own time, or listening to a guided practice. The more prepared the environment (e.g., chair or cushion placed by bed or bathroom), proximate in time to brushing, and closer to the bathroom you are, the better. The options are endless, and no one knows better than you what routine might work best.

A less formal yet extremely useful practice involves practicing while brushing. As you brush, direct your attention to the senses: the movement of your hands, the minty taste of the paste, the feel of the brush against the gums, the temperature and sound of running water. By attending to the in-the-moment richness of sensory input, you are naturally toning down mental chatter and cultivating present-moment awareness. With a little practice and repetition, brushing your teeth can be doubly refreshing.

## Practicing for the Moment and Moments to Come

One reason it can be challenging to establish a regular mindfulness practice is because of confused expectations. A look at the reasons we brush our teeth offers an apt analogy and useful reminder to an aspect of mindfulness practice all too easy to overlook and forget.

You likely brush your teeth for two reasons. An initial motivator is to freshen the breath. The other is to protect teeth and gums. The first is quickly achieved and short-lived, while the second is initially imperceptible and realized over a period of months and the course of a lifetime. The mindfulness practice equivalent to fresh breath is feeling a greater sense of calm, and mindfulness practices can indeed be relaxing. But, unlike brushing, this sweetness is not guaranteed. For while brushing with a minty toothpaste is intended to change the state of the breath, mindfully attending to the breath is not intended to change anything. Rather, the intention is to become more aware of one's experience, which at times may be unpleasant.

While mindfulness practice will reliably bring about a more relaxed state from time to time, its larger purpose is to cultivate greater resilience amid life's ups and downs, to see things more clearly, to cultivate greater wisdom. Were you given a toothpaste that did not freshen your breath, you likely would still brush because you know the larger reason for doing so. Day by day, you are creating the conditions for better dental health such that the return on investment of time spent brushing proves well worth it. So, too, with mindfulness practice. Even if a period of practice does not sweeten your mood, advantageous changes are occurring to the structure and function of the brain. Research on dental and mental health offers an abundance of evidence of the utility of both forms of practice, and you need not wait long to appreciate the benefits yourself.

Finally, many well-intended resolutions are short-lived because of the stress of everyday life and the impulsiveness that can derail the best-laid plans. Because mindfulness practices can help establish a resilience that leads to greater stability of attention and minimizes the influence of impulses, well-intended but vulnerable resolutions such as those mentioned above stand a better chance. And even when we falter, as we will, well, there's always the next moment.

If you found the toothpaste analogy to be of interest, you might enjoy reading "[It Tastes Terrific, and Just Look at that Shine](#)," published last year in this newsletter that draws on a 1974 *Saturday Night Live* skit with Gilda Radner, Dan Ackroyd, and Chevy Chase. And if you found the idea that mindfulness offers a good return on your investment of time, you may enjoy reading "[The Return on Investment from My Study and Practice of Mindfulness](#)" written by Paul Steven Singerman for the *Florida Bar Journal*.

Wishing you a steady resolve in 2021.

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