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MINDFULNESS WITHOUT MEDITATION

💄 By Scott Rogers 🔸 Special to the News 🛛 🖨 Columns

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This column frequently offers instructions and tips to engage in a variety of <u>basic</u> <u>mindfulness practices</u>. Today we look at a method of cultivating greater mindful awareness—advanced by a world-famous psychologist—that does not involve mindfulness meditation. If you enjoy practicing mindfulness, the work of Ellen Langer will add to your appreciation of mindfulness. If it doesn't come easy, you will

5 5 11

find her approach refreshing and helpful.

While mindfulness practices can meaningfully contribute to <u>relaxing tension and feeling calm</u>, they are primarily a structured way of steadying attention and <u>seeing things more clearly</u>. If this sounds vague, concrete examples include: realizing that critical self-talk is a transient mental experience and not a fact, appreciating that the angry adversary may be frustrated or scared, and waking up out of mind wandering and seeing, literally, what is right in front of you. Through practice we come to know first-hand that greater focus, clarity and insight can be experienced more frequently and have a longer half-life.

One of the first popular books on mindfulness was written in 1989 by Ellen Langer, a leading social psychologist and researcher at Harvard, who has authored over 200 research articles, six books and has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, four Distinguished Scientist Awards and the Liberty Science Genius Award. One might be tempted to conclude that Langer's extraordinary success is due to her practicing mindfulness. Afterall, her first book was the international best seller titled "Mindfulness."

REVERSE ENGINEERING MINDFULNESS

In fact, Langer herself (as of the last conversation I had with her a few years ago) does not meditate. Yet she is keen on the immense benefit of being more mindfully aware and engaged and has devoted much of the last 40 years to researching and sharing ways people can experience greater mindful awareness, separate and apart from meditating. Langer's approach is a cognitive one. It involves various techniques for attending to present moment experience that help counter the tendency to default to "mindlessness" when automatic pilot is switched on. Below are three techniques Langer advances.

NOTICING NEW THINGS

Take a few moments each day and notice things in your environment that you've gotten so used to they may no longer register—the color of the walls, the grain of wood on your desk, the placement of pillows on a sofa, the shape of eye glasses worn by a colleague, the leaves on trees swaying outside your window. While a meditative practice may lead one to more naturally and spontaneously appreciate these nuances, Langer approaches it from reverse and encourages a direct, intentional, cognitive engagement.

CREATE NEW CATEGORIES

Expand your judgments of yourself and others by looking to complementary interpretations that take into account that judgments are not stable and independent of context. "Impatient" might be recast as "concerned," "bull-dog" as "committed," and "rigid" or "slow" as "conscientious." Doing so allows you to free yourself from fixed conceptions, see the larger perspective found in each moment and across interpersonal interactions, and create new categories for enriching arguments, writings, collaboration, and well-being.

SHIFT FROM A PERSONAL TO UNIVERSAL ATTRIBUTION IF UNCERTAINTY

In one of Langer's most creative applications in the realm of working with uncertainty, she advocates shifting from a "personal attribution" of uncertainty to a universal one. What this means is more fully recognizing that "uncertainty is the rule for all of us and not just for the individual." For example, if you don't know an answer to the question "will we win this motion?" but believe it is "knowable" you may, out of insecurity and fear, overreact to the inquiry by unnecessarily retreating or recklessly charging forward. Retreat and you miss opportunities while charging forward can lead to unwise action and advice, all while feeling undue stress as the future plays itself out and the answers come to be known. In contrast, by adopting a universal attribution of uncertainty, i.e., "I do not know and it is not knowable" you are more likely to: not take personal those times when you do not know the answer, more comfortably acknowledge that such is the case, be freed to engage in more productive problem solving, and sleep better at night.

If Langer's approach appeals to you, you may find good summer reading with: "Mindfulness," "On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity," and "The Power of Mindful

2

Learning." She also wrote "Counter-Clockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility," which grew out of her social psychological research looking at the influence of beliefs, expectations, and mindset on the aging process. You may recall hearing about the group of septuagenarians who, as part of her study, attended a 5-day retreat where stereotyped beliefs about age were disregarded and the environment primed an earlier time in their lives. You can read more about this small-sample study and Langer <u>here</u>. Participants were instructed to immerse in the experience from the vantage point of a time when they were twenty years younger. The art on the walls, the music played, and magazines were from that era, and they engaged in discussions that brought them back in time. When all was said and done, their cognitive abilities and physical strength improved. They did not meditate or do cognitive exercises or strength training. Langer's message is that they were freed from the trappings of limiting beliefs. That is to say, they were more open and receptive to possibilities—attributes available to us all, throughout our careers and lives.



Scott Rogers, M.S., J.D., is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness in law and founded and directs the University of Miami School of Law's Mindfulness in Law Program where he teaches mindful ethics, mindful leadership, mindfulness and negotiation, and mindfulness in law. He is the creator of Jurisight, one of the first CLE programs in the country to integrate mindfulness and neuroscience and conducts workshops and presentations on the role of mindfulness in legal education and across the legal profession. He is author of the recently released, "The Mindful Law Student: A Mindfulness in Law Practice Guide," written for all audiences.