

Why Wandering Minds Are Unhappy Minds

Have you ever eaten an apple cider doughnut? I hadn't; but I was craving one.

My wife and I were hiking on a beautiful fall day. The first leg of the hike was unrelentingly steep. Sometimes at the beginning of a hike, my mind fills with complaints: too hot, too many bugs, too steep, too rough, too tired. On this day my mind was filled with the thought, "I'm so hungry, I would love an apple cider doughnut." I grew miserable, feeling hungry and craving a doughnut, over and over. Had a doughnut stand materialized in the middle of the hiking trail, I would have stopped to buy one.

My thinking was hijacking my experience of the day. The smell of the morning air, the sounds of the birds, the beauty of the forest, were lost to me. My awareness was constricted to my repetitive thinking.

I know that as I get into the rhythm of a hike and focus my attention on what I am doing, my complaining thoughts disappear. If I keep putting one foot in front of another, my thinking will begin to serve my intentions.

Twenty minutes into the hike I found I was no longer hungry. Not only that, but the thought of eating a doughnut seemed absurd.

As I began my hike that day, I had very little presence. Yes, I was on the trail, but my mind was elsewhere. How often are our minds engaged by some need we want to satisfy in the future? How often do we replay some past event?

Our Experience Depends Upon What We Are Thinking

What if our experience of life depends more on what thoughts we are paying attention to and less on what we are doing?

In their *Science* article, [“A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind,”](#) Harvard University psychology professors Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert write, “Unlike other animals, human beings spend a lot of time thinking about what is not going on around them, contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future or will never happen at all.”

Killingsworth and Gilbert found that almost 50 percent of the time our minds wander, regardless of what we are doing. This mind wandering reduces our happiness. They found that “what people were thinking was a better predictor of their happiness than was what they were doing.”

There is a myth that we will be happier if we only engage in pleasurable activities. [Killingsworth observed](#): “Even if you’re doing something that’s really enjoyable that doesn’t seem to protect against negative thoughts.”

Think of a time when you went back to a restaurant because you remembered having an enjoyable first experience. Was your second experience the same as the first? Perhaps not, even when circumstances were much the same. That is because our internal experience is being generated more by our thinking and less by our circumstances.

It is human nature to imagine that we would be happier if we only had to do pleasurable things. Of course, that is neither possible nor desirable. [Gilbert observes](#),

If you ask people to imagine winning the lottery they typically talk about the things they would do – ‘I’d go to

Italy, I'd buy a boat, I'd lay on the beach' – and they rarely mention the things they would think. But our data suggest that the location of the body is much less important than the location of the mind, and that the former has surprisingly little influence on the latter.

Consider These Scenarios

Perhaps you have experienced the misery of a wandering mind drawn to negative thoughts, as I did at the beginning of my hike.

You're at a meeting and instead of following your colleague's train of thought, your mind wanders to a rant about why he is wrong. Your mental bandwidth begins preparing the response you will deliver the moment he pauses. Your meeting is interminable and unpleasant.

You're driving home; frustration and feelings of futility mount as your mind replays all that went wrong that day. Someone cuts you off and you launch into a profanity laced tirade. Your fellow human beings in other cars seem to be obstacles impeding your path. If you don't shift your attention you may do something you will regret.

You arrive home; instead of being present for your family, your mind is still at work or on the road. Without your presence, your family seems like a burden; you do not experience a satisfying sense of belonging with those you love.

Beware—our thinking preaches that creating an ideal set of circumstances is the key to success and happiness. Happiness is not a product of our circumstances but to the thoughts to which we give our attention, moment by moment.

How often are we one big needy machine waiting for the world to fill us up?

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