



Transcript

Five Daily Helpers

# How Being More Aware and Taking Notice can Transform your Brain

# Lesson #3

# Take Notice



## Jim Lucas

**Jim:** Hello and welcome back to 5 Daily Helpers – the course where I teach you simple ways to get the most out of life by taking 5 simple actions. Today is Lesson #3. We are going to go talk about taking notice. STOP DAYDREAMING LUCAS! Pay attention you cretchin! There's work to be done! These were the words I remember hearing from history teacher Mr MacDonald all those many years ago.

You see like a lot of kids, I had better things to think about. I liked getting lost in thought about what I could get up to at break time. It was more interesting than immersing myself in the finer points of how the loom revolutionised the cotton industry in north east England during the industrial revolution.

Don't get me wrong. I loved history lessons. It was my favourite subject. But not everything in history holds equal amounts of intrigue. But, my teacher – Mr MacDonald - for whom I have fond memories, was trying to get me to focus. He was trying to get me to be present and to get the job done.

But what do we mean by taking notice in this context? What am I really talking about when we think about the importance of taking notice in a psychological sense. That is what today's episode is all about.

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## **But its Tricky!**

To deliberately notice things happening around you and inside of you can be really tricky. It doesn't come naturally. Your mind likes to get lost in thought about things in the future or the past. Or when you are doing something, your mind might be somewhere else. Like when you take a shower in the morning, assuming that's what you do, how often are you actually just thinking about taking a shower? Or are you having conversations in your head with people who aren't even there? Are you thinking about work or whether you've upset somebody?

## **So, what is taking notice?**

Taking notice is about being more aware so that you can contact the present moment. But what is the present moment? Well, it is exactly what is happening right now. It is everything you can see in front of you. It is the sounds you can hear when you listen out for them. It is the temperature in the air and it is the ground underneath your feet. It is what you can experience with your senses. Its hearing the sound of my voice right now.

I imagine, I don't know for sure, that for people who have lost the ability to see or hear, that they are much more regularly tuned into their senses. They need to use them much more. For the rest of us, we take it for granted. We don't need to intentionally engage our vision or our hearing. It just happens. And as a result, we get lost in our thoughts. This isn't to say that someone without vision or hearing doesn't get lost in thought. That is something that happens to everyone. My point is that our natural default mode is to be lost in thought about stuff.

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## What is the problem with being lost in thought?

So you might be wondering what is wrong with being lost in thought? A good daydream can be quite satisfying. It can pull you away from the boredom of an unexciting fact about history. We can fantasise about being somewhere else, in a different time or with different people.

What do you fantasise about? Is it about being in a relationship with someone you know? Being in a job you don't have? Being more likeable or funny? We all have fantasies about different stuff we don't have or aren't doing. Stuff that maybe is not in our gift.

In fact, these fantasies can be really insightful. They are linked to our emotions. They give you information about what you want, what you desire and what you need. Fantasies can be sign-posts to the life you want to lead.

So being lost in thought is not a bad thing. It's all about context.

Context is important because it helps you to make a choice about what helps and what doesn't. For example, if you are on the bus travelling to work it might not matter that you are lost in thought. But if you are sitting at your desk or you are having dinner with a close friend, it wouldn't be so good to be lost in thought.

Being lost in thought at work means that you wouldn't get your work done and this would be bad for your performance. Your boss would be on your back and you might risk losing your job. The other side is that you might be really passionate about what you do or about work in general. It might be important you work hard and do a solid day's graft. And, if you are lost in thought and unable to concentrate, then you are going to feel guilty and frustrated.

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Similarly, if you can't connect with a friend then they might think you aren't really interested. They might get annoyed or bored, because you don't really seem to be there. Have you ever been sat talking to someone and you suddenly realise that you haven't heard anything they've just said?

I have. Its normal. Your mind naturally wonders. But it's a problem if it is happening all the time or too often. People might not want to hang-out with you so much and you miss out because you aren't really connecting with people in meaningful ways. If your mind is elsewhere then you can't have a laugh. You can't tell a story and you can't listen to someone else's. You can't engage emotionally. You can't empathise with someone and you can't be open.

So, not taking notice of the here and now present moment can be a big problem. It can impact your work and your relationships. But more than that, it has a negative impact on your mental and emotional well-being.

## **Where your mind goes**

When you are lost in thought about the future, it often means that you are worrying. And, when you are lost in thought about the past, it often means that you are ruminating. What we know from the psychology research is that excessive worry is an indication and maintenance factor for stress and anxiety. And rumination is a risk factor for low mood, frustration and prolonged anger.

So, how do you control your mind and how do you learn to take notice more?

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## The Practice of Mindfulness

Well, you can't really control your mind. Your mind does what it wants. But what you can do is control what you do. You can make a commitment to practice noticing the present moment. One really effective way of doing that is through the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is now really popular in the western world. But it didn't used to be. The practice mindfulness meditation was something that just existed in eastern cultures. In the area of Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Saying that prayer in all religions can be a form of meditation. It is when someone intentionally practices being still to help them slow down their minds.

Let me give you an example.

When was the last time you noticed the sounds around you? Or the light reflected on the leaves in the trees? With our busy lifestyles, we are often focused on business and careers so much that we never really get a chance to stop and appreciate the simple things in life.

The simple things can be just what is happening right now as you walk for the bus or to the shops. It can be noticing your children playing together or being aware of the strangeness in your thoughts. But, it isn't always that simple either.

Your mind can get busy when it starts to pay attention to the here and now. It can pull you away. Especially when the what that is happening right now is painful. Your mind can throw up painful memories or fears about the future. You might feel angry or hurt by what someone has done. And you might feel guilty or ashamed for what you have done. It isn't always easy to focus on the here and now.



But learning to be open to your emotions and your thoughts is part of the journey. By practising mindfulness exercises in the form of meditation, activity and movement, you can train yourself to get better at noticing and being aware. You can train yourself to get better at taking an observer perspective.

In fact, this approach is the cornerstone of mindfulness stress reduction programmes. It is the cornerstone of acceptance-based psychotherapies like ACT.

Recent studies have shown that training to be aware of your own sensations, thoughts and surroundings for 10 minutes over just eight weeks can lead to feeling better for years! They also show that part of your brain that is associated with anxiety actually shrinks meaning it reduces your experience of feeling afraid. Not to the point of detriment though. It doesn't make you vulnerable. Far more likely, is that it builds your resilience and strength. It makes you wiser and more compassionate towards yourself and to other people.

So today, I want you to focus on:

1. Taking a few minutes just to sit back and take it all in. Use your senses to notice sounds, smells, tastes, sensations on your skin and what can be seen all around you.
2. Find a free mindfulness meditation online on your app store.
3. Trying to feel the breeze or listen to the rainfall outside or watch the clouds as they pass by. Letting yourself be an observer of what is happening.

Get practicing and I'll see you tomorrow for the fourth lesson which is about learning.



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