5 things people get wrong about mindfulness

Mindfulness is so hot right now. Editor-in-Chief Barry Boyce goes beyond the buzz and cuts through the confusion. Stay tuned—we're sharing a new myth each day this week.

By [Barry Boyce](http://www.mindful.org/author/barry-boyce/) | November 30, 2015

Illustrations by Brad Amorosino

**Myth 1: Mindfulness fixes something that’s wrong with you**

*What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I do this? I’m so bad at it. I’m just bad altogether.*My*mind is a scattered mess! These*other *people seem fine.*Everyone who has ever meditated, or tried anything new—playing the guitar, becoming a parent, snowboarding—has had thoughts like these running through their head. Often repeatedly, and in a downward spiral that ends with “I’m not cut out for this. I’m no good. I quit.”

It’s an odd trait we humans have. We like to beat up on ourselves. We like to say, “the problem with you/me is…” And popular meditation literature can provide lots of adjectives to complete that sentence:

Too distracted

Too speedy

Too negative

Too spaced out

Too etcetera

All of them lead to corresponding ideas of what meditation must be like. We’ll solve these problems! Heads vacuumed free of thought, utterly undistracted, we’ll go to a special place where each and every moment is momentous. We’ll be…wait for it, cue flute music…Meditating.

But it’s not like that.

Meditation is not getting to a fixed destination. It’s exploring. We get to venture into the workings of our minds: our sensations (air blowing on our skin or a harsh smell wafting into the room), our emotions (love this, hate that, crave this, loathe that) and thoughts (wouldn’t it be weird to see an elephant playing a trumpet).

All the benefits of meditation arise from experiencing our mind as more workable. We can focus and guide it better and we can also let it go. More dance, less straitjacket.

The practice of mindfulness—being curious about what’s happening in our mind—is freeing: we come to feel that the movement of mind is not so mysterious, so we can learn to navigate sensations, thoughts, and emotions more skillfully. The voice in our head is less annoying. All the benefits of meditation arise from experiencing our mind as more workable. We can focus and guide it better and we can also let it go. More dance, less straitjacket.

But it’s not fixing. Your mind is naturally capable of mindfulness, awareness, kindness, and compassion. It’s not in need of fundamental repair.

Of course we stumble and stray and flail about in confusion from time to time and sometimes frequently. What we need first is a modicum of stability. By gently repeating a simple habit, returning to an anchor for the mind, such as our breath, bit by bit a steadiness emerges that allows a better view of what’s happening in our mind and more opportunities to make choices. The point of returning to the breath is not that thinking itself is problematic. When you’re learning to cook, you may turn the heat up too high and burn something. It doesn’t mean you’re not a cook. It means you need to adjust the heat.

**Myth 2: The result of meditation is a boring, bland, cult-like calmness and complacency**



It’s so easy to confuse the *practice*of meditation with what the *results*are presumed to be. Since we slow down when we meditate (we move little or not at all and our thought process eventually decelerates a bit), it’s natural to think this means everyone who meditates is supposed to be slow, forever, in everything they do: meditators can’t be short-order cooks, nor sprinters. They do everything in slowmo, one thing and one precious thought at a time. Air traffic controllers can forget about meditating.

According to this mythical notion, the meditator is colorless, bland, blissed out, and checked out. So wrapped up in her own mind and how it’s doing, she has no time for worldly matters. She’s not only a pacifist. She’s a passivist. No outrage, lust, sarcasm, or humor allowed. Unfailingly earnest at all times.

This is an old stereotype, but like all stereotypes, it’s pernicious and evergreen. And it gains new currency from new commentators. In a recent screed in *GOOD*magazine, a writer lamented the years she lost to meditation, the ones where she “moved at such a slow pace and got so little done and participated in so little in the world outside of those who have the luxury to yoga-fy and meditate and manage their thoughts that I am ashamed.”

Whoever suggested mindfulness meditation requires you to *manage*or *police*(her word elsewhere in the piece) your thoughts—and also get nothing done out in the world—missed the point. The point of slowing down *during meditation practice*is to allow one to see how one’s own mind operates. And there are, as we all know, countless types of minds (shy, outgoing, fast-moving, slow-going, ambitious, reflective…) and within each mind a vast array of emotions (from sad to ecstatic and every shade in between, including complex amalgams of various emotions that defy description). A healthy mind and a healthy community is diverse and able to draw on all its glorious parts to their fullest extent.

One of the leading institutions studying meditation is about just that. The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, founded by neuroscientist and emotion specialist Richie Davidson, uses that phrase to refer to inquisitive minds that make full use of a wide range of capacities and colorations. Meditation is one means to enable that fundamental healthiness of mind. Far from dulling us into sameness, mindfulness practice allows us to be ourselves more freely, with all the juicy and unique bits in full flower.