Peter Drucker once quipped, "Never mind your happiness; do your duty." Based on the latest science, we offer a similar recommendation that happy thoughts and feelings be viewed as a thermostat, a metric that offers insight into how things are going. When moving the thermostat becomes the objective of life, activities lose their intrinsic appeal and performance is compromised. If you want to be happy, get out of your head and into your life. Trying desperately to seek the positive and avoid the negative is not only a wasteful errand, it will also lead you to fail at what you desire most. The situationally aware person is ready to take advantage of fortuitous opportunities when they arise and prepared to tilt the expression of their thoughts and feelings toward happiness or unhappiness as appropriate. To claim the benefits of unhappy states described in this chapter, you must find, tolerate, and appreciate them. Put simply, you don't want happy people working as air traffic controllers.

CHAPTER 5

Beyond the Obsession with Mindfulness

*The critical difference between the thinking of humans and of lower animals lies not in the existence of consciousness but in the capacity for complex processes outside it.*

—Ulric Neisser

Head to a bookstore and you will find a shelf, if not a whole section, with titles touting the benefits of developing mindfulness. Mindfulness, simply put, is conscious awareness. It's the ability to observe the world around you without fouling it up with internal dialogue, judgment, or other distraction. It's the ability to see a dress as red instead of cute, or of experiencing disappointment for what it is, rather than seeing yourself as a failure. Mindfulness is in vogue right now. Phil Jackson, who as a coach won the most NBA championships ever, was famous for advocating mindfulness techniques for his basketball players. Mindfulness meditation and mental focusing are being used in psychotherapy, sports training, and even business. These days, mindfulness is being touted as perhaps the optimal state of human functioning.

Mindfulness enthusiasts aren't just under the influence of some
new age Kool-Aid. A growing body of scientific evidence supports the benefits of “gently observing” what is happening in the present moment, as opposed to judging it. A range of studies show that people with a tendency to be mindful in daily life report greater happiness, experience more meaning and purpose in life, have superior emotional intelligence, enjoy higher levels of self-compassion, and possess an enhanced ability to cope with chronic stress. Mindfulness, it turns out, is pretty cool.

If you want specific persuasive data, look no further than the two leading scientists who were both instrumental in popularizing mindfulness practices in the United States, Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin. The former is often considered the father of the American mindfulness movement, and the latter is well-known and highly regarded for his penchant for using fMRI and other brain-scanning devices to study the biological and physiological underpinnings of mindfulness. In a recent study, Kabat-Zinn and Davidson led an eight-week mindfulness course for employees working at a biotech company. After first exposing workers to a strain of influenza, Kabat-Zinn and Davidson discovered that employees in the mindfulness training showed a remarkable resistance to getting the flu.

As if better immune function wasn’t benefit enough, the researchers also discovered actual changes in employees’ brains after a mere twenty total hours of mindfulness training (two and a half hours per week). Researchers found a 400 percent increase in left-sided activation of the anterior prefrontal cortex. You’re probably wondering, “Do I want my anterior prefrontal cortex increased?” The answer is yes. This is the brain region associated with positive emotions and with the willingness to view stress as a challenge to be tackled rather than a threat to be avoided. It only took these office workers the amount of time spent in watching four football games and in taking three trips to the supermarket to modify their brains in ways that promote greater success. It’s safe to say that mindfulness isn’t just cool, it’s really cool.

If mindfulness is so helpful, why aren’t we hardwired to do it more often? There’s a reason why human beings evolved so that we spend an inordinate amount of time being mindless. Conscious thinking, which keeps us aware of what is happening in the present moment, is very limited in its processing capacity. Just think about the effort expended by our brain as we pass another person walking on the sidewalk. We estimate the distance from their body, calculate our speed and theirs, take stock of where our body ends and theirs begins so we don’t bump into them, and at the same time we masterfully move one leg and then the other without stumbling over anything on the ground, or smacking into tree branches extending into our airspace.

When you look at someone’s face, you quickly establish whether they are someone you know, and from their facial expression calculate whether the person is happy or unhappy, friendly or dangerous, or interested in stopping to talk. This task is all the more difficult because instead of being still, this other person’s facial muscles shift into slightly different expressions every few seconds, requiring constant reassessment. If it happens that you do know this person, there are also higher-level functions to access. You must recall their name, the nature of your relationship with them, remember what you talked about during prior interactions, and set into motion the fine-grained motor skills of eye contact (not too much or too little), speaking volume, verbal content, and listening and encoding skills required to maintain a conversation. If you were only able to proceed with conscious, deliberate attention,
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

you would never have the capacity to complete this overwhelming laundry list of activities.

Our conscious mind is simply unable to handle the complex, dynamic layers of data flooding us in each moment. One error in processing and you can step out in front of a fast-moving car, curse in front of your children, let slip a professional secret, burn your hand on the stove, or suffer a million small failures. By necessity, much of this mental processing happens at the speed of thought below the radar of conscious awareness.

In this chapter, we say mindless to offer a clear contrast to the cultural obsession with mindfulness as the answer to better health, relationships, and success. People often feel uncomfortable with mindlessness because it’s the opposite of intentionality, strategy, and all those forward-thinking hallmarks of superior human intelligence. A long tradition of intellectuals argues that the good life is one that is thoughtful and planned. Mindlessness, by contrast, is the hallmark feature of, well, zombies. Interestingly, by turning to the example of zombies, we can find an illustration of the benefits of mindlessness.

Steven Yeun plays Glenn on the award-winning television series about a zombie apocalypse, The Walking Dead. Over four seasons, Steven’s character transformed from an energetic hero to a jaded survivor as he and his friends escaped one flesh-eating zombie attack after another. You would think that, as an actor, Yeun would devote a considerable amount of mindful attention to the emotions, posture, and mindset of his character. This is especially true in tricky scenes where Yeun, as Glenn, pretends to stomp on a zombie during a fight scene. Yeun says that the secret to making it all look real is to think like a zombie; that is, to not think at all. Yeun cautions that if he gently attends to how many

inches his foot needs to be from the head of the actor playing the zombie it will come across as choppy and artificial. Instead of thinking too deliberately and hard (brute concentration) or adopting a non-judgmental observation of what is happening in the present moment (mindfulness), to do his job well, he must act with minimal conscious reflection—just as he would behave if he really did walk down the street trying to fend off a pack of zombies hungry for brains. He has to rely on automatic processing, which is about intuitive, instinctive decisions, and actions based on well-designed evolutionary hardware and years of training (which Steven Yeun has as an actor). At the heart of Yeun’s stellar performance is the ability to lose himself—his conscious mind—completely, and become a different person, the character on television who is trying to survive the zombie apocalypse that becomes an alternative world that millions of viewers enter for one hour each week.

The pages that follow explore three areas where scientific research suggests that mindlessness can help you become more productive, creative, and better able to handle the hassles and ambiguous terrain of daily life. We might define mindlessness as a spectrum, from absent-mindedness to full immersion in the subconscious, but this would not do the topic justice. Instead, we detail three types of mindlessness that can propel you toward greater success and well-being: (1) harnessing autopilot, (2) taking impulsive action, and (3) trusting mindless decision making. The most psychologically flexible—and the most successful—people have the ability to switch back and forth between mindfulness and mindlessness, instead of becoming stuck in one mode. Intentionally using these unheralded paths offers the 20 percent edge that will be lost to those who remain wed to the idea that mindfulness is better than mindlessness.
Three Mindless Paths to Success and Well-Being

Conscious thought stays firmly under the searchlight, whereas unconscious thought ventures out to the dark and dusty nooks and crannies of the mind.

—Ap Dijksterhuis and Teun Meurs

Harnessing Autopilot

To save computing space in the brain, people rely on heuristic thinking, that is, the use of automatic—and therefore mindless—cognitive shortcuts. One common way we use heuristic thinking is in categorizing things. When you show up to your local post office, you don’t begin your transaction by asking the clerk if she speaks the national language. You have already categorized her as a postal employee and, because she is, you can assume a great deal about what she knows (she will speak the official language, she will be literate, she will know the price of stamps, she will be able to answer questions about which forms of payment are acceptable, and so forth). Heuristics save time and valuable cognitive space by not troubling your conscious brain with unnecessary heavy lifting.

Research shows that people are able to make unconscious categorical judgments about others at amazing speeds. In a study on first impressions, participants only needed one-tenth of a second to reach conclusions regarding the personality of their target. In this brief window of time, people made judgments about trustworthiness, emotional stability, kindness, enthusiasm, carelessness, openness to new experiences, and other aspects of personality. To put this amazing, mindless personality detecting machine of ours into perspective, you took two hundred times longer than that just to read this paragraph. You might be wondering whether our assessments of other people lasting seconds are accurate. Across a wide range of studies, researchers have found that these “thin slice” observations are well above chance in accuracy (approximately 70 percent accurate). Pretty damn good for a blip of time and effort.

1. Mindless Detection of Sketchy Social Situations

One crucial aspect of autopilot thinking is determining whether a stranger is trustworthy. This difficult task is essential for effective social and business relationships, not to mention personal safety. Get this wrong and you could be swindled, attacked, or—at minimum—waste a great deal of time when you could be forming a satisfying, meaningful friendship with someone else. Many scientists believe that we give or withhold trust based on how other people respond to the cues we provide. Another person mirroring our behavior could signal that our needs, values, and well-being are of interest and concern to them.

Rick van Baaren and his colleagues at the Radboud University of Nijmegen found that when servers repeated customer orders (a clear sign that the waitstaff is being attentive) customers increased their tips by more than 68 percent. We are confident that customers did this mindlessly (not actively calculating how much money to put on the table based on whether a waitperson repeated their orders and requests for more water out loud). That simple act, repeating the order, is a subtle cue that the server is listening and can be trusted in the context of the restaurant.

High-maintenance social interactions can be painful, including conversations where you are out of sync with the other person, such as when you smile and lean close to tell a story and your partner doesn’t
move closer, too, or reveal any change in expression. An exchange without coordinated movements and some degree of mirroring feels uncomfortable. Researchers consistently find that we like people better when they mimic our mood and gestures—not when they make fun of us, but when they subtly mirror our posture, emotions, and even our ways of speaking. On the other hand, mimicry is inappropriate when we’re competing with someone, or when we’re asking a car dealer for advice on family sedans.

Psychologists at the University of Groningen, Duke University, and Yale University explored our reactions to “negatively tinged social cues.” In one study, when participants were greeted by a very formal, stiff professional who tried to mimic them during a social interaction, participants literally got the chills, feeling two and a half times colder than when the same person did not mimic them. What about when participants were greeted by a friendly, playful person? Participants felt twice as cold physically after spending time with a friendly person who didn’t mimic them, as if their body recognized the cool reception they were getting.

With this perspective in mind, imagine what happens in a study where strangers of different racial groups interact with each other, and afterward are asked to guess the room temperature. In a same-race interaction, the absence of mimicry by another person felt chilly, 2.04 degrees colder, to be exact; and when talking to a stranger of a different race, it was the presence of mimicry by that person that led the room to feel 2.47 degrees colder. These and similar studies are consistent with the idea that each of us has a gut feeling about situation-behavior mismatches. Mimicry is typically considered a sign of intimacy, so it’s easy to see why, when a person doesn’t expect intimacy, suspicions are raised by mimicry. Think of the psychological drop in temperature as an ever-so-slight signal on the fringes of conscious awareness that there are better, less threatening ways to spend our time than with the person sitting across from us.

We get this mindless form of self-protection courtesy of thousands of years of evolution. Asked about the practical takeaway, the lead author of the study, Pontus Leander, says,

Perhaps, one shouldn’t “try too hard” when trying to affiliate because it could easily backfire (for example, mimicking in a cross-race interaction). These studies highlight how some automatic processes are best left alone. I grew up in the South, and I often heard the phrase “if it works, don’t fix it”; maybe that is especially true for mimicry.

We argue for a sequence as follows: (1) in a social interaction with new people or a conversation involving a hot-button issue, allow the near-mindless process to do its work; (2) make a conscious effort to notice any changes in your body; (3) reflect on whether your threat detector cast its net too far. Yes, we are talking about the complementary benefits of starting with mindlessness and then bringing present-moment mindful awareness into the situation between you and other people. We are not advocating the need for a battle between mindfulness and mindlessness. They work in tandem, in a particular order.

The first part of the sequence, harnessing autopilot, is what we, the authors, had never considered before. Before writing this book, neither of us used temperature estimates as a factor when making business deals with new people or talking to strangers in hotel lobbies. Now we do. We become mindful of this benefit of mindlessness. Besides gauging someone’s physical attractiveness, intelligence, curiosity, and
likability, we remind ourselves to be aware when there is a drop in physical warmth around another person. Before we may have blurted out, “damn, it’s chilly in here,” but now when we shiver, or feel compelled to find another layer of clothing, we privately take note. We become a tiny bit more skeptical, looking for any signs of threat or manipulation that we didn’t consciously register before. With this extra bit of data that we previously ignored, just maybe we made a few better decisions in hiring employees and choosing taxi drivers in a foreign land.

2. Mindless Emotion Regulation

Interestingly, automatic processing also applies to emotion. Healthy emotion regulation—the attempt to control or alter the type, intensity, and expression of our reactions to the world—has been tied to almost every important part of living well. For example, researchers suggest that failures to effectively regulate emotions are partly responsible for individual problems such as depression, aggression, and infidelity, and, in the professional realm, poor performance, theft, and harassment of others. Knowing how important it is and how difficult it can be to regulate emotions like intense anger, fear, sadness, and embarrassment, it makes sense to ponder whether conscious emotion management consumes too much effort and is simply too slow to help us in strong situations.

By strong situations, we mean those times when we feel intense emotions and are pushed to do something, such as observing a strange man at the restaurant approach your daughter while she waits in line for the restroom, whisper in her ear, and slowly rub his hand up and down her bare arm. Think of the benefit of being able to regulate emotion mindlessly and automatically, before you even knew what you were feeling, dampening the tendency to engage in rash, ill-considered actions (in this example, grabbing a fork and making a mad dash to stab the man’s hand, only to find out that he’s your daughter’s new boyfriend). What if your mind could be trained to effectively help before you even knew you needed help in a challenging situation?

In two studies, Iris Mauss at the University of California, Berkeley and James Gross at Stanford University asked participants to unscramble sentences, embedded in which were words related to emotion management such as restrict, restrain, and cool or to emotion bursts such as unleash, boil, and explode. The researchers wanted to know whether being unbearably exposed to these words played a role in how participants dealt with their emotions when an actor intentionally tried to piss them off. The actor asked them to quickly count letters from a blurry article while giving them feedback that they were incompetent in an increasingly irritated, impatient tone of voice. Participants primed to let their emotions out felt 42.2 percent angrier than those primed to stay in control. A second study showed that participants mindlessly primed with words that helped control their emotions reacted with a lower heart rate and lower blood pressure when approached by an obnoxious actor.

What are the takeaways from this research? First, very sophisticated goals, such as tolerating toxic people and our own distress, can be realized without any conscious, deliberate action on our part. Second, these mindless acts of emotion regulation appear to be cost-free, in that people show not only less distress but also less physiological damage. Third, simple, brief, low-cost interventions can push and pull us toward healthier reactions to difficult social situations. This tells us that a powerful mindless system is already at work regulating our emotions, and that by learning to influence it we can increase its benefits.
3. Mindless Creativity

Innovation is a big buzzword in business and education because it has the advantage of being tangible, measurable, the result of creative ideas, and can be physically implemented in the real world. Elon Musk, the genius behind Tesla electric cars and SpaceX, is a perfect example of how creative fire can be the centerpiece of business. In fact, businesses—especially so-called mature businesses—spend readily on innovation consultancy for their products and management, and another big lump of money on creativity training for their employees. At the heart of many of these trainings are improvisation, risk taking, and the acceptance of a little failure. No argument from us.

Also at the core of many creativity workshops is the idea that you can consciously perform creatively. The more mindful you are, the more receptive you will be to creative insights. Mindfulness is attractive because of the clear ties to effortless, deliberate, smooth action. This fits with the notion that a well-lived life should not and cannot be easy. The cultural message is clear but misleading. Researchers have been eager to depict how it is problematic when a person is unable to control their mind such that it wanders. Is it a cognitive failure when your child’s mind wanders when the classroom teacher speaks? In an article on constructive mindlessness, psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman offers a counter to recent research and sentiments that dismiss mindless moments and mind wandering.

This perspective makes sense when mind wandering is observed by a third party and when costs are measured against externally imposed standards such as speed or accuracy of processing, reading fluency or comprehension, sustained attention, and other external metrics.

Beyond the Obsession with Mindfulness

There is, however, another way of looking at mind wandering, a personal perspective, if you will. . . . We mind wander, by choice or accident, because it produces tangible reward when measured against goals and aspirations that are personally meaningful. Having to reread a line of text three times because our attention has drifted away matters very little if that attention shift has allowed us to access a key insight, a precious memory or make sense of a troubling event. . . .

Pausing to reflect in the middle of telling a story is inconsequential if that pause allows us to retrieve a distant memory that makes the story more evocative and compelling. Losing a couple of minutes because we drove past our off ramp, is a minor inconvenience if the attention lapse allowed us finally to understand why the boss was so upset by something we said in last week’s meeting. Arriving home from the store without the eggs that necessitated the trip is a mere annoyance when weighed against coming to a decision to ask for a raise, leave a job, or go back to school.

From this personal perspective, it is much easier to understand why people are drawn to mind wandering and willing to invest nearly 50 percent of their waking hours engaged in it.

This point is echoed in an essay on sloth by author Thomas Pynchon, who said that

what Aquinas terms Uneasiness of the Mind, or “rushing after various things without rhyme or reason,” which, “if it pertains to the imaginative power . . . is called curiosity.” It is of course
precisely in such episodes of mental traveling that writers are known to do good work, sometimes even their best, solving formal problems, getting advice from Beyond, having hypnagogic adventures that with luck can be recovered later on.

Imagine if our minds were deprived of the ability to trail off. If we could not resist the pull of immediate tasks, would we better off? Would we be happier and more successful with an authoritative hold on where our minds wander? Mindless pursuits are indispensable to self-awareness, reflection, and planning. An argument could be made that our brains require free-floating mental activity to uncover, discover, and consolidate information in the same vein as our physical body requires adequate sleep, exercise, and vitamin D.

Before investing in specialized training, consider the low-hanging fruit of reimagining these idle, mindless states as gestation for creative insights. After all, creativity has long been associated with unconscious incubation, a point often underscored by Nobel laureates and prominent artists. You are likely familiar with the idea of the aha moment, that burst of insight that suddenly solves a problem or delivers a relevant idea when it’s least expected. There is, it would seem, something inventive about loose, unfocused attention. It turns out that research supports the idea of creativity sneaking up on us.

According to David Greenberg, author of *Presidential Doodles*, historical documents reveal that twenty-six of the forty-four presidents of the United States doodled while their minds wandered from whatever affairs of state (tax code reform?) were failing to grab their attention. Don’t rush to dismiss this marginalia as a waste of tax dollars, though, because scientists have found that when compared with nondoodlers, people who doodle show a nearly 25 percent bump in remembering what happened while they were doodling. It may seem ironic that doing something distracting actually keeps you on task, but doodling only requires mindless attention, both keeping you alert and replenishing the mental energy that would otherwise be drained by boring speakers. Unfortunately, schoolteachers, parents, and managers often see doodling as disrespectful and therefore to be discouraged.

What if classroom teachers and middle managers started from a different premise? What if, instead, they encouraged mindless activities as a counterbalance to intensive focusing? You can already see an example of this in companies and schools that play soft background music while people work; research shows that this can aid concentration and provide a platform for calm, focused, long-lasting activity. A less obvious example can be found in policies that allow airline pilots to nap. Imagine that long flight from Washington, DC, to Sydney, Australia; you expect certain comforts—a pillow, a movie, a toilet that flushes, and a flight crew that’s awake. Thankfully, nobody is telling you that the pilot was asked to take a twenty-five-minute nap in the cockpit seat while the plane cruises over the ocean. Don’t worry, though. NASA researchers found that pilots who took naps in this study were 20 percent faster in their decision making and made 34 percent fewer mistakes after they woke up. The power of strategically turning the mind off to recharge cannot be underestimated. Where else can you gain a measureable 34 percent performance improvement in less than twenty-six minutes?

To find out more about why turning consciousness off is helpful, we turn to Dr. Andrei Medvedev, a professor at Georgetown University Center for Functional and Molecular Imaging. In 2012, his team monitored the brain activity of adults taking a midday nap. These researchers found that, during these napping periods, the right hemisphere of the
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

brain—heavily associated with creative thinking—communicated frequently with the left side. Medvedev speculates that the right hemisphere is performing important housecleaning tasks when the body rests, such as helping transfer recent information and experiences into long-term storage.

This is like scheduling maintenance for your personal computer to autosave files and delete unnecessary information when you aren’t using it, except that something unusual happens when this mental cataloging takes place. Accidental collisions with older memories result in original and even bizarre combinations. When we’re asleep, the editor inside us is off duty, unable to declare some ideas off-limits, or to prematurely scratch them as impractical. It would be wonderful if each new combination of thoughts led to a creative breakthrough, but this conceptual soup is often inedible. This should be expected and honored. We shouldn’t expect a steady stream of four-star ideas; all we need is one juicy one every once in a while.

Creativity arises from the oddest of mindless activities. When researchers inquired about the origins of the most creative ideas produced by 104 public relations specialists for organizations in the United Kingdom, the office turned out not to be the wellspring of originality. Commuting to and from work was the top-ranked muse for ideas, shower and bath time coming in a close second. We refer to these environments as accidental creative hubs, or ACHs. To be creative, we must take full advantage of these and other ACHs, like mowing the lawn, washing the dishes, going for a run, or taking the dog to the park.

A cautionary note: mindless activity is not, by itself, enough for creativity to occur. Otherwise we would all be Georgia O’Keefe or

Beyond the Obsession with Mindfulness

Ernest Hemingway simply because we daydream while we’re doing the dishes. Mindless activity is, however, the loamy soil where the best ideas take root. Researchers have found, for instance, that the most creative people, and those who are most invested in increasing their creative output, intuitively look to nonconscious states for inspiration.

In particular, they are more apt to sift through their dreams, for example, and incorporate this material into their waking life. So plan for the unplanned by arranging to spend time away from activities where the mind is trying forcefully to create. And be ready to catch ideas anytime, anywhere, by always keeping a recorder within arm’s reach.

Acting on Impulse

If you enjoy someone who is fun and outspoken, you might call them spontaneous, and if you don’t, you might refer to them as impulsive. We have an ambiguous relationship with spur-of-the-moment activities. On the one hand we tend to see them as fun, but on the other they can seem foolish. One of the reasons impulsiveness gets a bad rap is that little attention has been paid to those situations when impulsive action gives rise to good results. So consider the following: a potential winter storm is a few days away and instead of spending yet another day at home with your three elementary school kids you click on that e-mail for weekend airline specials and book a family flight to Aruba for some delicious, warm weather. Plucking an intriguing-looking hardcover book from a bargain bin, ducking into a new café on instinct, giving in to a spontaneous sexual encounter, striking up a conversation with an interesting stranger—it turns out that impulsive reactions and unplanned activities, while risky, can be hugely successful and enjoyable. This is precisely because they are unscripted and the outcome is
uncertain, contributing to a mixed blend of anxious and curious emotions when we feel alive and fully ourselves—no false pretenses and none of the worries about making a good impression before taking a step forward.

1. The Liberating Effects of Losing Control

Imagine being dragged into a conversation on a controversial topic: legalizing marijuana, reducing the number of full-time firefighters and police officers to lower town budgets, deciding who gets what when Grandpa passes away. These topics are contentious because of their importance to the people directly affected. In the politically charged modern workplace, one of the most sensitive issues is diversity. Most modern, Western, industrialized countries accept that inclusiveness based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, or socioeconomic status is not only just, it is valuable.

Nicky Garce, a business consultant in England, spent years running diversity programs. She would arrive at an organization, round up the workers, and launch into multihour workshops about the importance of appreciating differences. She quickly became disenchanted with this approach. “Pointing out how different everyone was,” she confessed, “was pretty much a guarantee each worker would thereafter be pigeonholed as a woman, Indian, or gay.”

Many of us walk a razor’s edge between wanting to act as if there were literally no differences between people and talking about possible differences in sensitive, considerate ways. The problem with choosing words carefully is the sheer mental energy it requires. A white man, for instance, might spend lots of energy steering the conversation with a black woman toward innocuous, lighthearted, superficial fare. Both parties feel icky as they recognize the deeper truth that what is not being said is what matters. Two well-meaning people end up creating a high-maintenance interaction.

But what if you drained a person’s energy prior to the conversation so that they lacked the oomph to hide, escape, or water down what they were thinking? To do this, you might have employees run a 5K race or complete a New York Times crossword puzzle before work. In one study, scientists asked subjects to do something intellectually or physically challenging right before a potentially sensitive conversation with a member of another ethnic group. Freed from effortful attempts to say the right thing, mentally exhausted people ended up being less inhibited in a conversation about personal differences with someone of a different race and enjoyed the interaction 25.4 percent more. They were also viewed as less prejudiced by black observers who watched videotapes of the interaction. Finally, the tired, uninhibited participants were 72.6 percent more likely to candidly discuss diversity and how to effectively handle this sensitive issue.

Additional support for the value of impulsive, or less regulated, action comes from an unlikely source: cognitive declines in old age that precede degenerative brain diseases. In one study, researchers informed younger adults (averaging nineteen years old) and older adults (averaging seventy-three years old) that they were part of a community initiative to counsel struggling teenagers. Everyone was led to believe that this community initiative was about giving advice to kids via videotaped interviews with everyday people who had lived through adolescence (instead of with professional therapists). Study participants selected their teenager from a slew of folders, unaware that the same information was in every one: a picture of an obese teenage girl along with information on how she struggles with insomnia, bullying, an inability to form friendships, and a lack of interest in school.
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

When participants were asked to think about what advice they wanted to offer, older adults demonstrated great candor in their advice, directly tackling the girl’s weight and physical unattractiveness, as well as sharing stories about their own suffering as teenagers, how they coped, and what they learned from rejection and failure. Younger adults played it safe: 70 percent didn’t even mention the girl’s weight. Even more interesting, older adults with the worst cognitive functioning (as measured by a comprehensive neuropsychological exam) were the most open, 80 percent of them mentioning the girl’s weight and providing the most advice.

Researchers then asked two distinguished physicians with expertise in obesity to watch film of the interviews and rate the quality of the advice being offered. Older adults with inferior mental capacity were viewed as giving better advice than younger and older adults with superior cognitive capacity. Their lack of inhibition made them more approachable, empathic, and helpful, despite their willingness to address the uncomfortable fact of the girl’s obesity and its role in her social problems. In their article “The risk of polite misunderstandings,” Jean-François Bonnefron and his colleagues conclude that

Politeness taxes mental resources and creates confusion as to what is truly meant.

While this confusion is functional in low-stakes situations, it can have untoward consequences in high-stakes situations such as flying a plane in an emergency or helping a patient decide on a treatment.

Giving advice and serving as a mentor are two fundamental leadership roles for a parent, teacher, or executive. Failure to tackle sensitive issues increases the likelihood that tasks fail, relationships erode, time is wasted, and money is lost due to poor communication. Lean into those feared conversations. Try them when you’re a bit tired so that your natural defenses are down; this state can help you tolerate discomfort and draw on feelings that are less buttoned-down.

Making Mindless Decisions

We challenge you to go eight hours without making split-second decisions. Don’t change lanes in traffic, don’t invite someone to lunch on first meeting them, don’t blurt out any thoughts until they’re carefully weighed, don’t send a hastily crafted e-mail, and certainly don’t respond immediately to anything posted on Facebook. We won’t be betting in favor of you making it successfully the full eight hours. We’re guessing you could do this for one hour. If you happen to be at a shopping mall or watching television, we’ll reduce that to two minutes.

People have a tendency to muscle important decisions. We’re fond of laborious approaches to choice, such as creating cost-benefit analyses, consulting experts, and creating plans, when often sleeping on it is all we need. A more intuitive approach can seem almost new age, because it’s predicated on the existence of the unconscious and the belief that this ghost in the machine can do some of the heavy lifting of judgment while our conscious minds are elsewhere engaged. According to the brain capacity principle, when there’s too much data to digest, conscious thought is constrained by its process of attending to all the information, integrating it, retrieving relevant knowledge, and comparing and contrasting different choices until a final winner is selected. Mindless thinking has no such constraints because all its mental processing occurs outside conscious awareness. This leads to a counterintuitive rule of thumb: when complex decisions are required, after gathering
some conscious information, avoid thinking about it consciously. Take your time and let the unconscious deal with the choice.

Nowhere is this rule more pronounced than in the research of Ap Dijksterhuis. This Dutch psychologist has studied the intelligence of the unconscious for years. In one compelling study, Dijksterhuis was interested in whether soccer fanatics, with their obsessive insight into the sport, are better at picking winning teams than uninformed adults who would rather use the newspaper sports section as cat litter than read it. He briefly exposed both groups to statistics on soccer goals, assists, passing accuracy, interceptions, and arcane facts about several professional soccer teams. Dijksterhuis wanted to see how the two groups used this information.

When given enough time to weigh this wide variety of metrics on team performance, the soccer fanatics outperformed neophytes. No surprise there; fanatics used the data that they obsess over in their everyday life. But something weird happened when Dijksterhuis changed the rules. He let subjects deliberate for only two minutes, after which he prevented them from thinking about soccer by asking them to complete tough algebra equations. During these complex math problems, Dijksterhuis interrupted them and asked for snap judgments about which soccer teams would win upcoming games. Suddenly the neophytes outperformed the experts! Why? Because in the absence of pertinent data, the neophytes relied on whatever information grabbed their attention—such as high passing accuracy during rainy and wintry weather conditions, a statistic that experts might have glossed over. Neophytes based their gut reaction on unusual information right in front of them that their brain underlined, bolded, and bookmarked. Because experts had such a large repository of soccer facts stored in their brains, vital predictive information didn’t stand out; it is very difficult to unlearn old facts and drop biases, which they needed to do quickly in order to absorb new facts.

Results from the soccer study aren’t limited to the sports world. Gut instincts are just as relevant to injured people choosing doctors, obese adults deciding on a diet and fitness regimen, and medical practitioners diagnosing very sick patients. In a similar study, adults with advanced training in psychology were asked to determine from what, if any, psychological disorders a patient suffered. In one instance, these psychology experts read the case file of a patient and were then given four minutes to deliberate before making a decision. In another, they had to process the information from the file unconsciously while distracted with a word-search puzzle for four minutes. The experts made worse decisions when they reasoned more. In fact, experts making the more mindless decisions were five times as accurate as those making carefully considered decisions.

As we’re seeing, there are distinct advantages to unconscious thinking, especially when it comes to the ability to dissect, manipulate, and synthesize large amounts of information. But, of course, there are also distinct advantages to conscious thinking. If you know that having a window overlooking trees and rolling green fields is essential to your quality of life at work, for example, then you need to consciously bring this to mind when you’re offered a much bigger office with sleek ergonomic chairs but no view of the outside world. Otherwise you may get pulled in by the excitement of having so much space and be surprised by the precipitous decline in your spirits in the windowless months ahead. Where is the sweet spot between the two that helps you the most?

Take the problem of deciding on what apartment to rent, a decision that can be overwhelming. It would be easy if a potential apartment had every feature you wanted: low price, large bedrooms, nice bathtub,
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

enough closet space, balcony, a neighborhood with great restaurants and parks, low crime, and nearby public transportation and shopping. And—oh yeah—make it pet-friendly while you’re at it. In real life, finding an apartment is an exercise in compromise. You get the walk-in closet but not the public park, the updated kitchen but not the his-and-hers sinks. Most people try to engage in a mental shell game of swapping out the various parts in an effort to make a decision with which they can be happy.

In 2011, Dijksterhuis and his colleagues conducted an experiment in which participants had to find one or two ideal choices out of twelve possible apartments. But just like the real world, there were no slam dunks; the best apartments had eight positive features and four negative, and the worst had eight negative and only four positive. When people had to make decisions immediately after being given information on each apartment, they arrived at the optimal choice a mere 15 percent of the time. When people were given four minutes to mindfully contemplate each apartment, they arrived at the better choice 29 percent of the time. This indicates that being thoughtful trumps impulsive buying, but neither appears to be all that effective.

Interestingly, when the participants in a third condition were distracted with an unrelated word puzzle and then asked to make the decision, they did just as well, uncovering the best choice 30 percent of the time. What’s really interesting is what happened when participants were able to spend two minutes mindfully contemplating each apartment, and afterward their attention was diverted to irrelevant, difficult word games they had to complete for two minutes. Those who spent half the time consciously deliberating before making a quick, mindless decision after a tiresome word game arrived at the best choice a whopping 58 percent of the time. These folks spent half as long carefully analyzing each apartment and their decision making was twice as good.

Beyond the Obsession with Mindfulness

It is clear that mindful thinking alone is insufficient to help us reach the best decision in a sea of choices. We need to take advantage of the relative strengths of both conscious and unconscious thinking. An interesting but incomplete discovery, after all, where should we begin? Should our decision-making process start with conscious or unconscious thinking about the options in front of us? In a subsequent study, researchers discovered that the sequence of conscious and unconscious thinking matters. When apartment seekers were given two minutes to deliberate on apartments (conscious thinking) before being distracted by word games (unconscious thinking), they chose the best apartment 57 percent of the time. When the sequence was reversed, their ability to choose the best apartment dropped to 30 percent of the time.

No wonder there are so many books on mindfulness and irrational thinking! We’re still learning how to function optimally as fully integrated, whole people. This fascinating line of research shows us that the most efficient and effective strategy for handling complex decisions is to flexibly use conscious and unconscious thinking, in tandem and in that order. In a cognitively demanding situation with a large number of options, the formula for optimal decision making looks like this:

1. Spend a small amount of time mindfully contemplating the situation.
2. Stop.
3. Skip over to another unrelated activity for an incubation period.
4. Render a decision.
For decades, people have been looking to boost success by increasing self-awareness, but the researchers discussed in this chapter suggest a different approach. As an alternative, we offer the promise of (un)consciousness-raising strategies to help us all perform better at the goals we care about, and thereby live better. We offer the provocative notion that our behavior can be dramatically changed without any awareness on our part. Unobtrusive, unconscious information processing can lead us to be stronger, faster, and wiser in our decision making.

Consider the goal of increasing performance. At a call center, Gary Latham and Ronald Piccolo tested out a low-cost intervention on employees by giving them a photograph to view before calling customers. One photograph depicted three telemarketing reps smiling during a phone call (relevant accomplishment), another showed a woman triumphantly raising her arms as she crosses the finish line of a running race (irrelevant accomplishment), and a third portrayed the office building where they worked. Employees viewing photographs depicting accomplishments experienced a whopping 58 percent increase in the number of callers they persuaded to pledge money, whereas those viewing pictures of buildings showed zero improvement.

But that's not the amazing part. Get this: employees staring at the photograph of smiling telemarketers raised 85 percent more money than people staring at pictures of buildings. When asked how they ramped up their performance, not a single person mentioned the new, inspiring picture in their cubicle. Which do you think makes more sense: spending $10 for a poster and frame, or thousands of dollars on advanced trainings to improve employee morale, motivation, and performance? Here, researchers also found that subconsciously priming someone for high performance has an impact that lasts not seconds, or minutes, or even hours, but an entire work week.

Now let's move to bigger societal problems. Trying to convince people to stop using stereotypes about adults who are older, handicapped, gay, or of a different race has the unintended effect of making stereotypes easy to retrieve and therefore to use. In a similar vein, when smokers view antismoking advertisements, they end up smoking more. So when researchers corralled a group of white adults who admitted prejudicial views and a desire to avoid contact with blacks, the researchers wondered whether these views could be reconditioned without ever trying to convince their participants that prejudice and racism are bad.

When shown positive images and words about black Americans on a computer screen (picture a black child sharing her lunch with a hungry classmate), the white adults in the study were instructed to “approach blacks” by pulling a joystick toward them. When shown images and words of white Americans, they were instructed to “avoid whites” by pushing a joystick away from them. The idea was that repeatedly pairing subtle positive images of black people with the motivation to approach and appreciate them might revise the mindless habit of viewing black people as enemies who should be avoided. These researchers found that white adults trained to associate blacks with approach behavior experienced a 46.5 percent decrease in prejudicial beliefs compared with those who didn’t receive any mental retraining. But does this brain rewiring influence how a white adult behaves toward a black stranger? The answer is an astounding yes. After being trained to mindlessly associate black faces with approach movements using a computer joystick, in a getting acquainted conversation, white adults moved their chair six times closer to a black stranger (a trained actor
who was already sitting down when the participant walked in. Hot
darn, the brain is an interesting organ!

For those of us already working toward a greater appreciation of
diversity, we might not require reminders about the benefits of being
around people who don’t look like us or share the same values. But
here’s an important fact: all of us have an in-group, a circle of like-
mined folks we reflexively view as more appealing than the rest of
humanity. Whether it is religious people versus atheists, vegetarians ver-
sus meat eaters, feminists versus fans of pornography, or nerds versus
jocks, we all have biases, some that we recognize and many more that
are hidden to us. The latest science offers insights into how we can shift
these biases. We now know that with repeated movements we can re-
wire brain patterns to change the mind for the better. Mindless mental
training can be added to the list of strategies to enhance success and
well-being.

Harnessing Mindlessness

We offer a contrast to the large amount of scientific and public cover-
age suggesting that mindfulness is better than mindlessness. Under-
standing how mindless thinking bolsters success will give you an edge
over peers trying to log into a mindful state as often as possible. Even
if you wanted to, it is physically untenable to always be mindful. To
capitalize on unconscious thinking, we described the strengths of mind-
lessness in life areas as layered as goal pursuit, trusting people, creativ-
ity, prejudice, and complex decision making.

In certain situations, mindless thoughts enable us to be more

objective. You might find yourself resisting this statement. After all,
it seems intuitive that flash judgments on so-called unimportant sim-
ple decisions are fine, but that intense, focused deliberations are
required for complex decisions. We are here to tell you that effective-
ness is often jeopardized by beliefs about the superiority of mind-
fulness.

THE TAKEAWAYS

1. Mindfulness can be beneficial, but we are also naturally
   predisposed to mindlessness.
2. Automatic thinking helps conserve mental resources.
3. Mental depletion can lead to a productive form of dis-
   inhibition.
4. Mindless processing often leads to superior performance
   and better decisions, especially in complicated situations.
5. Subliminal prompts can push us toward greater goal
   effort.
6. Attempts to stamp out mindlessness are destined to fail.

Acknowledging the power of mindlessness is in itself an interven-
tion. People can also be trained to take advantage of this underappreci-
ated resource. Here are some additional shortcuts for harnessing
mindlessness:

1. Set ridiculously short deadlines—ten seconds—in which
to make decisions that you have already spent a few min-
utes paralyzed about what to do. In doing so, you force a
mindless decision. There is always a reason not to take a
trip somewhere. There is always a reason to stick with the same grocery store purchases. Take ten seconds and then press submit, put the item in your car, or walk away without wasting any more energy on the decision.

2. Use cues or signals that represent your goals. Do you want to be cool and collected in a situation, or be candid and open to whatever you’re feeling? Do you want to have big aspirations and be willing to take risks to achieve them, or be risk adverse, being sure not to make mistakes? Words and images can be taped in your room and on your desk that prime particular goals and motivational styles.

3. Schedule time for mental meandering. Mindfulness is a resource-intensive strategy; there’s a reason we are not exclusively hardwired that way. When the mind wanders, our brain activity is almost the same as when we are resting. Ideas collide and creativity happens by accident. Households and organizations can be organized to encourage strategic mindless activity. This is one of many reasons that free play and physical activity during recess is the last thing that should be removed from school schedules.

4. Set rules for the use of intuition. When you have a simple choice to make, you will be better off with a logical, deliberate method. When you face a complicated decision, you will make it more effectively when you spend a few minutes contemplating the available information, give yourself an incubation period where you do something else (“sleep on it”), and then switch over to mindless, gut intuition.

Beyond the Obsession with Mindfulness

Instead of choosing a winner between your two modes of thought, mindlessness and mindfulness, we argue for the relative merits of both. If you discount half of human thinking, half of human consciousness, then you create an artificially low ceiling for your success and well-being.