

Stay curious

Harvard professor Ellen Langer on mindfulness and active noticing

Ellen Langer was the first female professor to gain tenure in the Psychology Department at Harvard University. As a social psychologist she has been researching mindfulness since the early 1970s. She is the author of eleven books and more than two hundred research articles on this topic. Her book «Mindfulness» is considered a benchmark and is currently in its 25th anniversary edition. Ellen Langer approaches mindfulness as a universal principle which is not only accessible through a special tradition or practice alone. Curiosity and the associated noticing of new things are additional keys to mindfulness. Knowing not to know makes it possible to discover new options and alternative choices – for everybody, be it individuals or organisations.

ZOE: You have been researching on mindfulness since 1972. What prompted you to start your research at the time?

Langer: It's hard to go back in time to know exactly what it was. There were many things that made it seem interesting to me: I'd walk into a mannequin, and I'd say I'm sorry; my father seemed to always forget his keys, things like these that couldn't easily be explained would happen frequently. And then, before I came up to Harvard, I had the belief that Cambridge, full of all of these Harvard people, the brightest of the bright, would somehow be more aware than the people in New York. And it turned out that they too are mindless.

So, I started to believe that this mindlessness may be pervasive. And that's what the research seems to have shown us.

ZOE: So, what's mindlessness?

Langer: We are brought up believing that things stay still. And we confuse the stability of our mindsets with the stability of the underlying phenomenon. Everything is always changing, everything looks different from different perspectives, but we are unaware of this. So, when we're being mindless we hold things still; we believe we know and are relying on absolutes. When we're mindless, the past overdetermines the present, we're more or less acting like robots. And sadly we're oblivious to it. Our behavior tends to be goal and routine governed. And it's numbing.

The interesting thing is, the other side of this couldn't be easier. And yet the consequences of being mindful are enor-

mous. So, mindfulness as I studied it is the simple process of noticing new things. That's all it is. It doesn't matter if what you notice is a small, a silly, or even a vulgar thing, as long as it's new to you it draws your attention to it.

When you notice new things about the things you thought you knew, you come to see that you didn't know them as well as you thought you did. So, then your attention naturally goes to it. Creating or noticing novelty is the essence of engagement. And the research shows that it's literally and figuratively enlivening.

In early studies for example we gave people choices. In nursing homes, where we found they live longer as a result. It's interesting because you have lots of people, who wait to become engaged in something, and all you have to do is notice, and you become engaged. So, we have women who hate football, watching football, where they just watch it or they notice one new thing, three new things or six new things. The more you notice the more you like it. And it's true no matter what it is you notice things whether it's people, places or things.

ZOE: In your book «Mindfulness» you are outlining key qualities of mindfulness. Can you elaborate?

Langer: Well, as you're noticing new things and you come to see that you didn't notice as well as you thought you did, that leads you to be open minded. When you're noticing new things you come to see that things look different from different perspectives. So, these three things, openness to alternatives, an

active noticing, and taking different perspectives, each leads to the other. And all of them come about when you recognize that you don't know.

ZOE: So, are you saying that mindfulness provides us with more choices?

Langer: Yes. Right now people make a decision. For there to be a decision means there was uncertainty. No uncertainty, no need for a decision. Once people make that decision, however, they act as if there had never been any uncertainty, as if the selection were handed down from the heavens. By having this mistaken notion people rob themselves of choice. Another mistaken assumption is that evaluations are out there rather than in our heads which also robs us of choice. If we believe it is good, we feel we have to have it and if it is bad we have to avoid it. But whether it is good or bad depends solely on how we view it. If we thought of ways that this option provides these good things, this other option provides these others, we'd find that doesn't really matter if you choose A, B or C. We can make any of the choices work for us. People are afraid of doubt, and don't recognize that if you don't have any doubt you don't have any choice.

The original work we did in nursing homes, where we gave people choices and found that it led to all sorts of good things, not at least of which was an increase in longevity, showed how important making choices is for us. The process of making a choice is mindful: you're noticing things about the alternatives. It's that active noticing that's important. Just the noticing keeps the neurons firing, and is enlivening.

ZOE: But uncertainty is very often unsettling...

Langer: Uncertainty is unsettling because people believe that we can know. So, what I teach my students is make a universal attribution for uncertainty rather than a personal attribution for uncertainty. Right now people make a personal attribution, they say, I don't know, you're acting like, you know, maybe I should pretend I know and just hide my ignorance. And they feel unintelligent and incompetent. When you recognize that everything is always changing, everything looks different from different perspectives, it means, you don't know, I don't know, nobody knows. This universal attribution for uncertainty says no one can know and then not knowing is easy. This stance allows us to be confident, but uncertain.

ZOE: What does that mean for leadership today and tomorrow?

Langer: I think that once the leader is less evaluative, once a leader realizes that those people they're leading have much to

offer that's being overlooked, then the main job of a leader is to provoke other people's mindfulness.

We did this research with orchestras, where we took several different orchestras, and we were going to have them be mindful or mindless. They all were going to play the same piece of music. When they were mindless they were told, remember a time you played this piece where you enjoyed your performance and just replicate it as well as you could. The mindful group was told to make it new in very subtle ways that only they would know. Remember, they were playing classical music, so these distinctions had to indeed be subtle. We recorded the performances and we played it for people who knew nothing about the study. They overwhelmingly preferred the mindfully played piece. So, mindfulness leaves an imprint on the products we create.

The musicians also overwhelmingly preferred playing mindfully. It was only when I wrote up the paper that I realized this hidden finding is relevant to leadership. Encouraging everybody to do their own thing resulted in superior coordinated experience – everybody is in the moment and they are all taking their cues from the same set of circumstances.

If you add to this the idea that behavior makes sense from the actor's perspective or else the actor wouldn't do it, then we would have renewed respect for many of the people we now belittle and think need a strong leader. Taken together, this suggests that the main job of the leader might be to encourage those being led to be more mindful. If we did that, everything might take care of itself.

I was giving a talk in South Africa, and I was staying at this fancy hotel, and I was down by the swimming pool. There was a very, very large section there that was totally unused. The only person who knew that was the boy who set up the chairs – not the leader at the top of the company. If we didn't have such a hierarchical notion of worth we would set things up to actually get this information. Getting this information could lead to greater profit for the company.

ZOE: How can a leader instigate such mindfulness with his team?

Langer: The leader needs to recognize three things. One, they don't know. If you don't know you go forward differently from when you're sure of something. If you're sure, then anybody who disagrees with you is in trouble. And second, is the realization that there are multiple ways to get to any goal and many people may have useful input. Third is that the goal that they're aiming towards was a decision, which means there was uncertainty, which means that there may be a better way of doing things so it might be a good idea to question the goal periodically.

ZOE: Are there universal principles of mindfulness?

Langer: Yes. The definition of mindfulness is active, intentional noticing. What you're actively noticing may vary by culture. But the fact of noticing is universal. Remember that active noticing is the essence of engagement. People all over the world are engaged, even if in different things. Germans may be engaged in soccer, Americans in football. Noticing the particular plays, aspects of the particular players, is mindful regardless of the sport. So yes, I believe that's universal.

«There are many ways to get to any place. The point is, once you're here you're here, it doesn't matter how you got here.»

ZOE: Yet there is this buzz of mindfulness looking towards the Eastern traditions...

Langer: Yes. What was interesting to me, when I started in the early Seventies I was studying mindlessness. It was actually kind of funny. Somebody said to me, well, you are what you study. So, I decided to turn it around and study mindfulness. And as soon as you use the word mindfulness, then people informed me, and I became educated in Buddhism and so on. It actually pleased me that the work that I was doing that was derived from a Western scientific perspective came to many of the same conclusions as this ancient tradition. But they're very different. People from the East or people from the West who are meditating, for them it's a practice. Mindfulness as I study it, is not a practice, it's a way of being, you just notice.

Meditation is a tool to lead you to postmeditative mindfulness. There are many ways to get to any place. You want to get from Germany to the United States, you can take different kinds of airplanes, you can take a ship, you can swim, maybe. The point is, once you're here you're here, it doesn't matter how you got here.

ZOE: So, what are different tools to achieve mindfulness?

Langer: The two tools are meditation and a shift to an appreciation of the power of uncertainty. What you're doing when you meditate is, you sit quietly and repeat a mantra or focus on your breath or something. And thoughts intrude and you go back to your mantra. By going back to the breath or the mantra you're basically saying it's just a thought, it's not real.

For us, we "attack" the thought directly. Whatever you believe, I would say, how can it not be. Let's look at stress for instance. Stress results from two things. First, a belief that something is going to occur. Second, that when it occurs it's going to be awful. If you say to yourself: what are three to five reasons why it might not occur? All of a sudden you go from

thinking it's definitely going to occur to maybe it will, maybe it won't. So, it's less stressful.

Then, if it does occur how might it be a good thing? Because again, evaluation is in our heads, not in the things we're evaluating. So, now you generate ways that this thing that seems to be bad, could be good. And you go from a situation where this bad thing is necessarily going to happen, to the belief that it may or may not happen. And if it happens, it'll be good or bad, depending on how you want to think about it. Stress then diminishes and completely leaves.

Or let's take being evaluative. People who meditate say that meditation leads you to be less judgmental. And it might, although I'm not sure exactly how it does that. I think that at least in part, it's people who want to be less judgmental who meditate. If you want to be less judgmental, just be less judgmental. But for us there are very particular things to do. If you recognize that behavior makes sense from the actor's perspective or else the actor wouldn't do it, and you ask yourself what sense does this behavior make, people's annoying behavior would look different. For example, you'd see that rigid is consistent, somebody who you think is gullible, is just trusting, somebody impulsive is actually spontaneous, someone inconsistent may just be flexible, and so on. So, when you realize that the behavior can be seen as positive, you become less judgmental.

Mindful active noticing is a direct way of achieving many of the goals people hold for themselves.

By looking for multiple solutions, multiple answers, multiple ways of understanding any particular situation makes you less tied to any one view. You know, right now, as I said before, people tend to be brought up in a world of good things/bad things. When you realize that it's neither good nor bad, you can just be. You can stay responsive to the world but not reactive. If you meditate, you're also implicitly acknowledging that living a life of push/pull is not ultimately rewarding.

ZOE: You often write about creativity and mindfulness. And you're an artist yourself.

Langer: Yes I paint. Which is great fun. I began when I was fifty, so late in life, without any training or really knowing what I'm doing. And in doing it, it led to many ideas about the mindlessness of evaluation. Since I didn't know what I was doing why would I expect that I could do it well? Because I was already successful in another career why did it matter? But sadly, at first it did. And so it gave rise to lots of research on how to cut the ropes that choke us and keep us sealed in un-lived lives.

If you ask, «what is the relationship between mindfulness and creativity», I could have called mindfulness «mundane creativity.» The reason I didn't is because we have such mindless notions about what creativity is. When most people think

about creativity, they focus on the product. Mindfulness is all about process. If today I came up with the theory of relativity, it would have been mindful. Since Einstein did it first, it would not be seen as creative. Nevertheless, when you create your products, drawings, paintings, poems or widgets mindfully, it ends up bearing the imprint of your mindfulness and so you typically end up with a more creative product.

Thus we can think of mindfulness as a mundane creativity. When mindful, we're noticing, we're creating novelty and best of all we're fully enjoying the process.

Sadly, most people are mindless much of the time. And so I suggest to people one way of undoing all of this mindlessness is to throw yourself into some creative task. It can be drawing, photography, it could be a new sport, playing a musical instrument. The reason for us to start with a creative task is we tend to be a little less evaluative. As you immerse yourself in this task you can experience what it feels like to be fully engaged, fully alive. And then anything that takes you away from that feeling, is leading us into being mindless.

In the «On Becoming an artist» book I talk about the roadblocks to «throwing» ourselves into an activity. One roadblock we've discussed is the mindless notion of evaluation. Another is our fear of making mistakes. Mistakes are interesting. Mistakes lead people to avoid lots of fun activities. The fear of mistakes leads people to be timid and overly routinized. When you recognize that mistakes provide all sorts of opportunities to which you'd otherwise be blind. Sometimes we're better off making a mistake, because it then leads us to be mindful. Our research has shown that if we make a mistake and then go forward with what we're doing rather than go back to the original plan, the product is better than if we just completed it mindlessly without a mistake.

Making mistakes takes on a different meaning when you realize that most of what we're doing, we're doing because we made a decision. And then as I said before, if something is a decision it was initially uncertain. What happens is, as soon as we make the decision and forget all that uncertainty, we set ourselves up for, «oh no, what if I make a mistake,» and we mindlessly stay the course even if it's not in our best interest to do so. For example: Shall we go for Chinese food or pizza. And we go back and forth, if we go for Chinese food we'll be hungry a half hour later, but if we go for pizza, we'll probably eat too much, but if we go for pizza that'll be probably less expensive, etc. And finally out of this you make the decision you are going to go for pizza. You go to the pizza place and it's closed. Now, that feels like a mistake, why did we choose this. And then you feel bad. You shouldn't feel bad because you didn't know you wanted pizza anyway. So, you turn around and you walk across the street and go for the Chinese food. We can't know the «right» answer because everything is always changing. The same is true for a painting. Should I use red or magenta paint?

I choose red and mistakenly dip my brush in magenta. Rather than assume red was the correct color because it was my initial decision, I should actually look anew at the canvas and now decide what to do.

ZOE: What does that mean for the readership and their work, and their work with clients?

Langer: I think that what we want to do is see that a mistake is only a mistake in certain contexts. So, if I were dealing with a client I would ask them what are the advantages to this very thing, that seems to be a mistake. You'd be surprised how quickly you come up with them. I would give examples that I give in my books and when I teach. For example, this company CEO put all his money and ego behind making a glue that turned out to be a mistake. The glue failed to adhere. Terrible, stressful, right, a terrible failure, a big mistake. Then he thought to use the glue that failed to adhere as a post-it note. The essence of a post-it note is to take advantage of the fact that it doesn't adhere. So, was it a success or a failure? It was a failed glue, it was a successful post-it note.

ZOE: How can coaches, trainers or consultants work more mindfully with clients?

Langer: The first thing is, people tend to be unhappy because they are evaluative. So, you need to teach them that evaluation is in your heads, not in the things you're evaluating. You want to show them that whatever they think is good is also bad, whatever is bad is also good. That when people are stressed you want them to generate reasons that stressful events might not even happen, and if it happens what are three, five reasons that it might actually be good. You take the fears that they have (usually fear of evaluation) and you show them that behavior

Ellen Langer – Biography

Dr. Ellen Langer, Ph.D., is a social psychologist and the first female professor to gain tenure in the Psychology Department at Harvard University. She is the author of eleven books and more than two hundred research articles written for general and academic readers on mindfulness for over 35 years. Her bestselling books include *Mindfulness; The Power of Mindful Learning; On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity;* and *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*. Professor Langer is also a gallery exhibiting artist.

– their behavior or the behavior of others – makes sense from the actor’s perspective or else the actor wouldn’t do it. So, if somebody is negatively evaluating somebody for being impulsive, you want to turn it around and see it as spontaneous. Somebody for being gullible is trusting, lazy is insufficiently motivated, distracted is otherwise attracted in someone. Every negative characteristic has a positive counterpart that’s equally powerful.

You want to teach people that mistakes depend on context. You change the context, it’s no longer a mistake.

What we need to do is teach people that the world is much more fluid than the way we respond to it. We hold it still mistakenly to experience control over it. But by holding it still we’re giving up real control because in fact it’s not staying still. So, what we want to teach them is, to have a healthier respect for uncertainty, and to exploit the power in uncertainty.

«The world is much more fluid than the way we respond to it. We should exploit the power in uncertainty.»

ZOE: Isn’t that again a very Western concept of rational planning and controlling in what we see...

Langer: No. First of all I think the world is much smaller than it used to be. These East-West differences are not nearly as clear as they may have been in the past. In the West, people were seen as valuing independence and in the East, interdependence. The metaphor for the East, is “if a nail sticks up (you stand out and are different from the group), it’s (you’re) going to be hammered down.” And in the West we speak of the squeaky wheel gets greased. So, here it’s good to squeak but not in the East. (Women, Quakers, and many men, however in the West were always interdependent.)

But regardless of East or West, the ways we understand behavior and position in the group, can be understood mindfully in multiple ways or mindlessly in single ways. Moreover, the notion of success or failure should be broadened, success in what? And how to become successful, and to recognize that there are many ways of doing things. If it doesn’t work doing it this way, do it another way. These things are true across the globe.

Everybody would benefit by recognizing that uncertainty is the rule, and mindfulness works to our advantage.

ZOE: «What else is going on?» is the question I learned from Edgar H. Schein. You taught him that. So, what else is going on?

Langer: Yes. Asking what else is going on will lead us to be in the present, to think about new options, to be more mindful.

Our mindlessness is costly to us, our companies, our families and countries. If any, we should have only one mindset and it should be for how ubiquitous uncertainty is. We can’t know, so not knowing is okay. And then dull routines become exciting again. Forty years of research have shown me that mindfulness is easy, fun and good for us personally and professionally – we become more productive, healthier, happier, and dare I say, nicer people.

ZOE: Thank you so much for the interview.



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