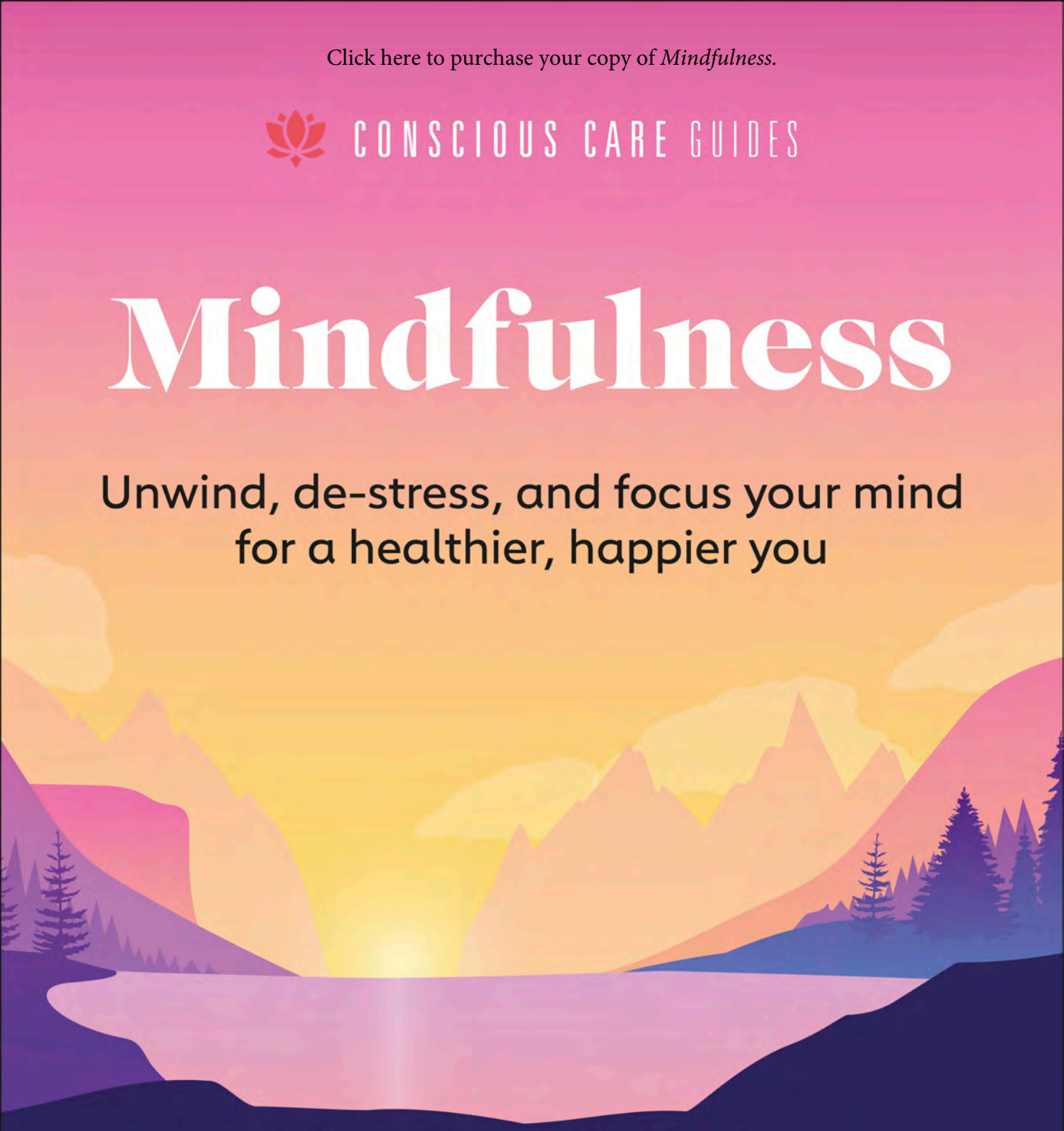
CONSCIOUS CARE GUIDES

Mindfulness

Unwind, de-stress, and focus your mind for a healthier, happier you



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CHAPTER 15

Getting Things Done with Less Stress

You probably fill most of your time and energy managing your life—maintaining your health, taking care of your responsibilities, making a living, and nurturing relationships. Fortunately, mindfulness isn't something special you add to your long list of activities, and it isn't a stress-relieving technique that requires you to put aside everything else in order to practice it, although there's, without doubt, a value to doing just that.

Mindfulness is something you can cultivate every moment *as* you take care of your life and get things done. When you're mindful, you're more attentive, present, and available—for yourself and others. You get out of your own way and are better able to respond quickly and appropriately. You tend to experience less stress and feel less discouraged by challenges. In this chapter, I discuss how to practice mindfulness as you go about taking care of the practical aspects of daily life. I also talk about some of the main sources of stress when you're trying to get things done, and what to do about them.

The Basic Approach

To extend the benefits of mindfulness into the more active areas of your life, start by adopting a new perspective on things. It's worth being present for *everything* you do, because you can *always* see things more clearly and learn to take better care of your life. In Part 2, I walked you through a series of classic objects for mindfulness you can use to develop your awareness, including your body, feelings, states of mind, and psychophysical factors like ill will, lethargy, energy, or concentration. Not only can you practice awareness of these things as you go about your daily life, you can also make the very objects and concerns of your life the focus of your mindfulness. Anything—the manner in which you wake up in the morning, the breakfast you eat, the clothes you wear, the drive to work, etc.—can become an object of your mindfulness. You can see things more clearly and understand them better.

Watchful, Curious, and Awake

Becoming mindful of your life doesn't mean you continually analyze it or second-guess your choices. Mindful awareness is more like watching than like analyzing. Although that sounds simple, your inclination to watch the day-to-day unfolding of your life tends to be severely compromised by your assumption that you've seen it all before, and you already understand it sufficiently, as discussed in Chapter 9. You figure you don't need to question things or pay attention to them unless they're new or causing serious problems. When you focus the lens of mindfulness onto your life, try to stop making these assumptions. Maybe you know what happens next; maybe you don't. Maybe you understand your own motivations; maybe you don't. Instead of assuming, become willing to develop the kind of curiosity discussed in Chapter 10 about your own, apparently mundane, everyday life.

Mindfulness as a way to help you get things done more effectively may imply that it's a special, newfangled solution to life's problems. In fact, mindfulness is so basic to being human it's amazing that it even needs to be identified or discussed. It simply amounts to being awake for your life—attentive, receptive, open, and willing to adapt. For the reasons discussed in Chapter 2, however, mindfulness *does* need to be talked about and deliberately cultivated. Still, it's always good to remember it's essentially a skill very basic and natural to you, and it can come to describe the way you operate moment by moment.

It's much easier to be mindful when you're doing something you enjoy, or something you consider interesting or worthwhile. Go ahead and practice cultivating mindful awareness during those kinds of activities—they're a good place to start. However, you'll only experience the full benefits of mindfulness if you start paying more attention during activities you don't enjoy or that you view as boring or merely necessary.

Awareness of the Body

Cultivating mindfulness as you go about your activities can most easily be accessed by taking a moment to become aware of your body or physical sensations. (Chapter 4 explains in detail how to do this.) Mindfulness of your physical experience expands your receptivity and grounds you in the present moment. You remain aware of what other things are going on, but your perspective shifts slightly. Bringing your attention to your current somatic experience in this fashion also has the properties of immediately cutting through stress.

For example, when working on the computer, you probably go about this task in a habitual way. Chances are your attention is completely focused on the task itself. This may seem like the best or only way to get something done, though expanding your awareness to include your body doesn't interfere with your ability to do the task. Instead, you also become aware of yourself doing the task. You notice your posture and whether you're tense. You notice your mental and

emotional state—whether you're anxious, tired, resistant, or enthused. You become aware of the whole context of the task, including how you're progressing on it in terms of time and its priority level in the overall list of things you need to accomplish.

To help get you started on this process while going about your daily tasks, pay attention to your hands whenever you remember to do so. Notice their position and movements. Be aware of any sensations you feel in or on your hands. Pay attention to whether they're resting on a table or a steering wheel, holding a cup or toothbrush, gripping something with force, or manipulating an object gently and skillfully. Don't change what your hands are doing in any way. Simply bringing them into your awareness brings you back to the present moment. When you do this, what else do you notice? Can you taste a moment of "just being" in the midst of your activity? Do you notice any urge to change anything rather than just being with what is happening now.

You might say mindfulness is less about paying attention in any special or intense way, and more about making sure your awareness stays open. When you're thinking about the future or the past, or absorbed in thoughts or projects, your field of awareness narrows. There may be a time when doing this is fruitful, but generally speaking, even intense thinking sessions benefit from periodic grounding in mindfulness. The longer you go without checking in with what's going on in the present moment, the more likely you are to miss important information. Your back may get sore because you're hunched over your project. You may entirely miss the emotional reactions of someone you're dealing with. You may become so intent on a task that you can't put it down, even though other things need your attention. Your efforts may be stressing you out to the point that you're frustrated and irritable and no longer working efficiently. Cultivating mindfulness in all settings helps you make decisions more in harmony with the state of your body, mind, and circumstances.

Effective Means Mindful

It takes a moment to shift into mindfulness while you're doing something. It doesn't have to take long, but it can be beneficial to pause for at least a few seconds. The longer you can give yourself to attend to physical sensations and settle into the present moment, the calmer you'll tend to feel and the broader perspective you'll have. When you resist taking a moment to be mindful, you're probably quite stressed and a moment of mindfulness will be all the more useful.

After you pause and expand your awareness to include the body and its sensations, you're able to perceive more of what's going on within and around you. You're much more likely to recognize when an urge to think, speak, or act arises in you—before you go ahead and follow that urge. Often, the first thing that arises when you're actively engaged in the world is a *reaction.* Stimulation from your environment interacts with your conditioning, and your body-mind spits out an answer that usually is born from habit. Even if you keep that answer to yourself, it's still present in your mind. When you introduce mindfulness into the picture, you have a chance to

consciously reflect on your reaction and take other aspects of the situation into consideration. What results from this is your best *response* to things. This response is usually wiser and more effective than your reaction would have been. To clarify, a *reaction* is an impulse to think, speak, or act that arises spontaneously in your body-mind after you experience something. It's likely to be habitual and highly conditioned. A *response* is conscious and deliberate thought, speech, or action you choose as the best way to answer or deal with the situation in front of you.

For example, let's say you're fixated on straightening up your apartment before company comes over. They're due to arrive in an hour, and you have lots to do. You feel anxious about being able to finish everything in time, so you try to move quickly. When you need to open a drawer and it sticks, you react by yanking on it harder. When it still won't open, you react further by getting angry and pulling on it with all your strength. As it flies open, you see something was wedged in the drawer that you've now broken.

A mindful response to the same scenario is to acknowledge your frustration when the drawer first gets stuck and then pause to take stock of the whole situation before reacting. You might take a deep breath and sigh, but you'd probably open the drawer gently part way, see if you could ascertain what's keeping it closed, and remove it. In the case where you indulge your reactivity, it's not that you lack the intelligence to know an object is blocking the drawer and yanking on it might break it. You are simply so focused on your immediate agenda that you don't let other information and possibilities enter your awareness. Generally speaking, mindfulness doesn't make you a smarter, nicer, and more patient person; it just lets you access the smarts, kindness, and patience you already have.

Things You Must Do

It's very tempting to use your responsibilities as excuses not to be mindful. You figure you've *got* to take care of something, so you don't have spare time and energy for niceties like mindfulness. There are commitments to be kept, deadlines to be met, dependents to take care of, clothes to be washed, bills to be paid, exercise to keep up with, and social connections to maintain. For many people, modern life involves a to-do list that never shrinks no matter how hard they work. Most of the things on such lists do not seem optional. Almost everything comes along with a sense of imperative, which means you're pretty much always neglecting something you *need* to get done. This can lead to an enormous amount of stress.

Experiment: Everything Is Optional

Mindfulness invites you to experiment with the way you approach things and then observe the results. As discussed in earlier chapters, mindfulness helps you become less identified with your thoughts, judgments, and emotions. You begin to recognize them as being *part* of your overall experience and not necessarily reflections of absolute truth. You don't have to believe them or

act the way they're telling you to. This opens other possibilities, and when you try a different approach, mindfulness lets you monitor the outcome, so you can learn what works best.

If you tend to procrastinate, cultivating mindfulness as you go about your work can help you stop procrastinating so much because you'll be more aware of when you're doing it and more aware of the consequences later. Mindfulness can also help you take more responsibility for things by letting you see where you're underemphasizing the importance of something simply because you don't want to do it.

Here's an attitude experiment to try if you want to get things done with less stress: *look at all the tasks on your to-do list as optional.* Your first reaction to this suggestion is probably to think of all the things on your list that can't possibly be viewed as optional. You *must* make dinner for your kids and pay your bills! However despite your conviction, try looking more closely at your reasoning. For each task that isn't optional, there's an "or else." If you don't feed your kids, they'll starve (or complain loudly). If you don't pay your bills, your utilities will get shut off. These likely outcomes are probably completely unacceptable to you—thus the sense of imperative associated with the tasks.

However, even in these cases you're making a choice. Because you don't want such and such to happen, you're going to complete a particular task. Ultimately, you don't *have* to do anything. You do things because you want to take care of your life. Sometimes, this slight change in attitude, from thinking of yourself as laboring under a bunch of imperatives to thinking of yourself as voluntarily doing your best to take care of things, can make a big difference. You might not even need to intellectualize it—just "try on" the attitude that whatever you're doing is optional. How does it feel in your body and mind? Does it make you less resistant or overwhelmed? Does it make you feel more relaxed and enthusiastic? And most importantly, are you able to get things done just as efficiently or even more efficiently? You may find that mindfulness makes tasks inexplicably easier and more enjoyable.

Experiment: Worst-Case Scenario

A closely related attitude experiment is to imagine the worst-case scenario if you fail to complete the important tasks on your list on time and then make peace with it. Sometimes, of course, this worst-case scenario really is unacceptable because it threatens someone's health and safety. However most of the time, although the worst-case scenario sounds like the end of the world to you, it really isn't. Maybe your visitors will arrive before you're done cleaning and get a low opinion of your housekeeping. Maybe you'll arrive at a meeting 10 minutes late and people will think you're flaky. Maybe you won't finish painting before the weekend is over and you'll have to walk around your ladders and paint cans until the next time you have a chance to work on your project.

Can you make your peace with the worst-case scenario? Imagine it happening and then observe the reactions in your body and mind in the present moment. You may tense up somewhere in your body, or you might start thinking about all the reasons this scenario would be a disaster. What is the essence of your determination to avoid it? Chances are good it has to do with other people's opinions of you or with your own convenience, comfort, or pleasure. If you notice this is the case, don't argue with yourself or judge your concerns. Just gently point out to yourself that if you accept the possibility that your worst-case scenario may happen and you'll have to deal with it, you could go about your business with much less stress.

Think of a task you really need to do or else terrible things will happen. Don't pick something that might result in physically endangering someone. But short of that, let the issue be something serious that's causing you stress. Let yourself imagine all the likely negative repercussions from not taking care of things in a timely manner. Be specific; it may be good to write them down. If necessary, consider the further repercussions of direct results. How would you deal with each thing on your list? Although you're going to try to avoid them, can you imagine still finding ways to appreciate your life even if they happened?

Remember, chances are very good that if you do a task mindfully and let go of the sense that it absolutely must get done, you will, nonetheless, get it done. In fact, the chances are even better you'll get it done, and get it done well. If you have a hard time letting go of your sense of imperative, try doing it in small steps. Let go of it a little bit or just for a while and then observe what happens. This can build your confidence in letting go of your habitual ways of engaging tasks in favor of mindfulness.

It Has to Get Done Now

Stress often arises from a sense of time pressure—something needs to get done now or very soon. Alternatively, it isn't that a given task needs to get done quickly, it's that you feel the need to keep checking items off your to-do list to avoid becoming completely overwhelmed by the number of tasks you must do. This leads to two typical reactions. First, you work with a sense of impatience and hurry, anticipating the task being over even while you're still doing it. You may push too hard on things physically and mentally, trying to get everything to move a little bit faster. Even when it's clear they're not going to, you may find it hard to relax—as if everything will slow down unless you keep your mind and body tense. Second, you keep working until you've used up your energy, patience, and ability to think clearly. You know you're compromising your health, and you aren't working as efficiently or well as you could, but you figure you have no choice.

Experiment: Just This Moment

Nothing counters a sense of time pressure like the basic practices of mindfulness of your breath or of the movements of your hands. If you're like many people, willfully trying to slow down

meets with huge resistance. Instead, just try shifting your attention to something physical that's happening in the present moment. This turns your attention away from the near future, so you're less likely to be preoccupied with it.

Mindfulness of the breath or the hands maybe basic practices, but they're also very effective. Note that you'll probably have to bring your awareness back to these simple things over and over. Your mind will repeatedly wander or leap to the future. This is where your mindfulness meditation practice will be a big help by giving you practice in returning to the present moment. To encourage yourself to keep up the effort of staying in the present moment, you might remind yourself that mindfulness will actually help you be more efficient. You might also invite your hands to move as quickly as "they" would like, as long as you can maintain awareness of them. If you do this, you may find your hands seem to have a mind of their own as they go about complicated tasks with amazing skill.

Experiment: Gentleness

As an experiment, when you're stressed about not having enough time, imagine everything you're handling is very delicate and expensive, so you have to be very careful and gentle. In this case, you can still move quickly, but instead of pushing too hard, throwing things around or slamming things down, you must be mindful about how you treat them lest they break. If you think about this when you're hurrying to get something done, you'll probably notice you treat things like tools, doors, and supplies as if they're unbreakable, unimportant, and easily replaced. Maybe they *are* sturdy and cheap, but treating them like this encourages you to manipulate your environment as if everything is there only to further your agenda.

Here's an example of how trying to be more careful and gentler with things can change the whole flavor of your work experience. A friend of mine was a cook in a kitchen that served three gourmet meals a day to guests. It was a small kitchen operating under almost constant time pressure, and the temptation to hurry and get stressed was very strong. To encourage his own mindfulness in the kitchen, my friend adopted a policy of "no noise." Instead of banging pots and implements around, he tried to move them with a minimum of noise. Rather than just telling himself he *shouldn't* hurry or feeling bad because he did, he adopted one simple rule, and it affected everything he did.

There's a classic Zen essay, written in 1237, about bringing mindfulness to your work called "Instructions to the Zen Cook,". The author, Zen master Dogen, advises the cook to treat the rice, vegetables, and other ingredients "as carefully as if they were his own eyes." Can you imagine treating everything with that level of care? (From *How to Cook Your Life*: *From the Zen Kitchen to Enlightenment* by Dogen and Kosho Uchiyama Roshi, translation by Thomas Wright.)

It Needs to Be Done This Way

You may examine your sources of stress and realize much of it comes from a determination to do things a particular way. You're likely to think of this as the *right* way. You may not even be perfectionistic, at least not about most things, but you have standards about certain tasks that you can't let go of. Maybe you need to proofread all copy twice. Maybe you need to make sure your team has practiced to the point that you know they'll operate smoothly when they get to the tournament. Maybe every corner of your house needs to be vacuumed weekly. Maybe the blanket on the couch needs to be folded just so before everyone goes to bed.

Mindfulness doesn't require you to lower your standards; it simply requires you to recognize when your standards are the primary source of your stress. When you do this, you may find small places you can compromise to reduce your stress. You may end up realizing that *this time* you're not going to pull things off quite the way you'd like to. When you're completely focused on a standard, you're not being mindful. You're likely to miss some of the impact your choices have on your body and mind or on others. When you cultivate receptive awareness of what's going on, you may notice that trying to meet one of your standards is simply having too much of a cost. The realization that the cost is too high isn't a moral judgment, and it doesn't come from outside. It's something you may or may not conclude for yourself. Seeing more clearly, you may find that greater happiness leads in a different direction than meeting your standards.

Experiment: Leaving Things (a Little) Shabby

If you tend to stress out about doing things a particular way, here is an experiment you might like to try. For the most part, go ahead and do a task according to your usual standards. Then, stop a little short. Leave things just a little bit shabby or go just a little unprepared. There doesn't have to be a dramatic difference from the way you usually do things; other people don't even have to notice. In fact, they probably won't, but *you* will. Let your photographs get printed with the red eye still unfixed. Let dust build up on the top shelf where no one looks. Let the agenda for the meeting remain somewhat vague.

Of course, if you habitually let these kinds of things slide, this may not be the exercise for you. Still, there are probably certain things you *don't* let slide, so try this experiment with those tasks. Notice how you feel when you "finish" the task, but it's not up to your usual standards. Does it feel like you're getting away with something? Is any part of you relieved you didn't have to bother with every detail? What happens over time? Does anyone notice the difference? You may decide to keep up your standards in the future, but it's possible to pick them back up consciously and deliberately, so they don't carry quite the imperative they used to.

Sometimes, the desire to do a task in a careless or incomplete way is a subtle way of rejecting the activity. Perhaps you think it's beneath you, or you resent having to do it. When this is the case,

you might improve your state of mind by taking extra care with a task instead of taking shortcuts. Just as you "believe" your own mind when it judges something as unpleasant, your mind is likely to "believe" your body when it starts acting as if a task is rewarding and worth doing well.

You Are the One Who Has to Do It

Sometimes, of course, you really are the only person who's going to get a particular thing done. No one's likely to show up to clean your house when you live alone (unless you pay them), and it's probably not a great idea to have someone else send your mom a card for her birthday. Still, there can be tasks that a number of people share some responsibility. This often happens in communal households, at work, or in other kinds of organizations.

When you see something that needs to be taken care of, but no one else is doing it, you not only face the burden of doing it yourself, you also face the possibility of resentment. You have enough to do as it is, and now there's a task on your list because others are too oblivious or lazy to do it. Or they may recognize the need, but they take it for granted that you'll have it covered. You do the work because you want things to be cared for, but you probably do so with a sense of dread that people will take advantage of you even further because of your willingness to pick up their slack.

Experiment: Picking Your Thing

There's no denying people will sometimes slack off and let others take responsibility in communal situations. It's not that your resentment is unfounded. However, taking stock of your circumstances with mindfulness will allow you to see which response will be useful and which will simply increase your own misery and have little or no effect on others. If you stay receptive instead of getting too caught up in your own opinions and reactions, you can identify what *you* can change about the situation.

One experiment you can try is to pick one or two tasks you think of as yours to do. These are generally things only you seem to notice need to be done, or things you take care of better or more conscientiously than anyone else. You choose these things while keeping in mind your own stress level and other responsibilities. Ideally, you quietly pick one or two things you can handle and then make a vow to yourself to take care of them without worrying about any of the other tasks, or about what anyone else is or isn't doing. If you can manage this, you might even be able to be cheerful about the responsibilities you've chosen.

In households, communities, and organizations, most people either feel they're already doing more than their share, or they resist doing things because they don't want to end up doing more than their share. Ironically, communities and organizations function best when everyone feels like

they're doing more than their equitable portion of the work—so you might want to try it assume that it really is just your share, despite how it feels.

Experiment: Letting Others Step Up

At times, the sense that you're the one who has to do something is related to your standards, as discussed in the previous section. Others may be willing to tend to a particular task, but it pains you to watch them do it because of their lack of ability, attention to detail, or timeliness. Depending on your stress level and number of responsibilities, you may opt to delegate instead of doing something yourself because the cost of doing it is just too high. This can lead to an ongoing sense of stress anyway, because you still feel some responsibility for the task that's now being done in a way you don't approve of.

A useful experiment is to invite others to do a task, even though you know it won't get done in a way that meets your standards and then just watch. Without mindfulness, your attention is going to be on the flaws in their work and the repercussions of things being done to lower standards. With mindfulness, you can be aware of these things, as well as the benefits of getting others to participate. Not only do you have less to do, it can be extremely valuable to get other people more engaged in taking care of communal responsibilities. It can improve relationships and increase people's sense of ownership in a household or organization. It doesn't always work, but sometimes you might find the compromise in terms of standards has been more than made up for by the benefits of not trying to do everything yourself.

Activity as Generosity

Finally, it can help your stress levels a great deal if you can recognize in what way your work is an act of generosity. When you're doing something out of sincere generosity, you usually feel inspired and enthusiastic. What you're doing seems worthwhile and positive, even if it will only provide a small benefit to one person. However, it can be hard to see an activity this way if you're doing something you don't enjoy, you're getting paid to do it, or you feel like you have to do it. Pretty much everything you do contributes in some way to taking care of the world. Even if you're only looking after yourself, that's something no one else must do.

You may be able to adopt a sense that your activities at home and out in the world express generosity, but it may not be so easy to do. Still, part of the mindfulness practice is recognizing you have influence and choice when it comes to the way you use your body and mind. You're not doomed to simply react to your circumstances. A different perspective may transform the nature of your experience, so it may be worth adopting it for its own sake instead of waiting to be convinced. You may need to adopt the attitude that your work is of benefit to the world over and over, moment after moment, but each time you do, it can lend a sense of joy and enthusiasm to your efforts—natural stress reducers.

Think about your encounters with other people as they simply go about their daily lives with generosity. A cheerful checkout clerk can brighten your day. A careful receptionist who calls you when there's a cancellation and offers you an appointment much sooner than you anticipated. Someone who lives near you may cultivate a lovely flower garden that inspires you whenever you walk by. An attentive driver may help you avoid an accident. In all these cases, people are just doing their best and are benefiting others.

Mindfulness is something you can practice every moment—even during the tasks of your daily life. No matter what you are doing, expanding your awareness to include your body or physical sensations increases your mindfulness. This will make you more attentive, responsive, and effective. And looking at everything you do as a beneficial contribution to the world, no matter how small, can help you feel more positive about your activities.

For more information about *Mindfulness*, please visit DK.com.