

From The Family ADHD Solution

by Mark Bertin, M.D

Practicing mindfulness, we try to get out of ‘autopilot’ – mindlessly running around lost in thought, reacting to situations without foresight. In bringing our attention to our moment-to-moment experience, we’ll still find some parts of life pleasant and others unpleasant. We also build the skill of noticing and labeling the sensations we experience, our thoughts and our emotions – —an essential component of mental health. And as we become familiar with our habits, we often recognize what we have been doing unconsciously – —and then have the option of choosing a new path.

Of course, you might wonder, what does following my breath or noticing that my feet feel warm have to do with ADHD? It’s a fair question and the answer is, you have to start somewhere. You want to break lifelong habits and develop new coping tools, but you cannot begin in the midst of a behavioral crisis. That’s why most beginning mindfulness exercises examine far less emotionally charged aspects of life than just your interactions with your child or your own ADHD. As you get more practiced down the road, you’ll expand towards more challenging moments and even then, the opportunity to return to your breath will be available as a calming and less daunting focus for your mind.

Stepping into Life

There I was in this store and my two boys were running around, I didn’t know exactly where. I was looking for new jackets for them. I’d never get it done if I chased them around. And then the store manager came up and said to me, “Your kids are running up and down stairs with a four- hundred-dollar fishing pole,” and without thinking I said, “Why were they able to get their hands on a four-hundred- dollar fishing pole?” He looked kind of stunned, and I felt like I’d won. And then I looked around the store. Several people had heard, and two had their kids right with them. All of sudden I

realized, how come I was the only one whose kids were out of control? It was the first moment I recognized, something has to change.

Without effort, we live out our lives barely paying attention to what is going on around us. We spend so much of our time not quite here. We carve out a little time to relax and go for a run, and then instead of taking the time to recharge we spend the time mentally rehashing our financial situation. Reading a book with our child at bedtime, we dwell on a problem at work. Wherever we are in life, our minds are often off somewhere else, not fully involved with the world around us.

When we live on autopilot, something rattles us and we stay lost in thought. We may dwell or ruminate afterwards – *—I can't believe she said that. I should have kept my mouth shut. Next time what I'm going to say is* and through all that extra thought, we're not paying attention to our lives as they are happening.

We often lose out brief moments of peace. Frustrated that the morning unraveled, we fail to take advantage of ten minutes respite as our children board the bus. Our bodies and minds remain in stress mode. We're ready for action, and agitated, and formulating what we'll say next time around. But we're actually in a quiet, warm house drinking our morning coffee.

We might yell when our children misbehave because we always have yelled when our children misbehave, and it gets them in line. And our children have learned their own habits, their own autopilot. They've learned they don't have to listen until we start yelling. Everything up until then is play time. Since anything we do repetitively becomes hard wired, these well-worn

paths exist in our brains. A pattern we fall back on becomes that much easier to trigger the next time around, regardless of whether it is particularly skillful, or what we'd recommend for a friend in the same situation.

We all have our ways of responding when challenged. Tripping on the way to the podium, one speaker might think, *What a klutz I am.* Another might think, *How embarrassing, they're all laughing at me.* Another might lash out, *Who left their bag in the aisle? You nearly killed me.*

We can't expect to, and nor should we want to, strip ourselves of every habit. Each response has a time and a place. Being obsessive about cleanliness and detail is imperative for a surgeon in the operating room. Maintaining that same standard with your family kitchen? Perhaps a cause of stress. What is skillful and brilliant in one situation may not apply in another.

No habits are inherently better than any other. At some time in life, you'll want to stand up to the world. At some point, you you'll want to take stock of yourself and withdraw. There's a time to yell, to react with fear, to hyperfocus on a crisis until it is solved. Awareness of our habits allows us to pick and choose which we give weight to; our lives do not need to be dominated by them. There's nothing right or wrong about most habits, but there's no need to let them run your life. ***