

Ep #2: Be Your Own Watcher



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With Your Host

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Mindfulness is about getting present to what is and accepting life on life's terms. It's about getting in touch with ourselves and the world around us in new and deeper ways. It's about creating cognitive distance between ourselves and our thoughts so we can ask the simple question, does this thought I'm having serve me or is it something I can release, let go of, change?

You can't change what you can't see. And mindfulness is the first step in changing the way we relate to the world so that we can build the life and health of our dreams.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my loves. It is so insanely cold in New York City right now. Everyone on the street is all sniffly and coughing. The subway is like this massive Petri dish. I have to stay on my immune-boosting game every day to make sure I don't get sick. I hope you're doing the same and I hope you're warm and healthy and happy wherever you are.

So now, onto the good stuff. On this episode, I want to talk about one of my favorite ways to stay mentally and physically healthy, which is mindfulness, without which I swear I would have completely lost my mind about 450 million bajillion times. So I just want to start by acknowledging that this is an enormous concept. People write books and books and books about this.

I'm not pretending I can teach you everything you need to know about mindfulness in one podcast episode, but I'm going to help you build a foundation, and then each week, I'll be infusing mindfulness teachings into

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the rest of the work we'll be doing together. So with those wee disclaimers in mind, let's get into it.

At the core of my medical and coaching practice is a deep belief in the power of managing our minds, telling the story we want to believe about our lives. Instead you're already like, "Bah, this is some new age garbage..." I'm not talking about some bullshit positivity. I'm talking about science.

The science of neuroplasticity teaches us that we can reprogram our brains and can create new neural networks by simply believing new thoughts and practicing them. There's the old saying, "What fires together wires together." Which means that when you practice a new skill or a new thought over and over again, your neurons, or brain cells, actually change and start to associate a new thought with a new feeling. Science, I'll tell you, it's pretty amazing.

So, when you keep telling yourself your old stories about who you are and how you feel in the world. You make those stories stronger in your brain too. Your brain believes you. When you tell a story like, "My digestion is just the worst..." which I hear all the time in clinic, or, "Man, he is always just trying to make my life harder..." your brain believes you.

Conversely, when you practice a new story like, "I'm not going to take this one personally..." or, "I know I can heal my IBS one small step at a time..." can take control of your thinking, and thus, your feelings. You start to take back your health on a deep cellular level.

And it is impossible to change something we are not aware of. So today, I'll be focusing on mindfulness as the first step in changing our lives and our health, and I'll be doing a podcast soon where I detail the strategies I use to help shift our thoughts so we can feel better in our lives using a cognitive behavioral framework.

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So, most of us have heard about the power of mindfulness and meditation. It's calming, centering, lowers blood pressure and improves brain function. What you may not know is that it helps balance our stress hormones, supports our metabolism, and regulates our daily energy. Mindfulness also plays an important role in fertility and can help improve our digestive function too by regulating the stress response within our gut.

This helps keep food moving smoothly through and out of us. Maybe you're having trouble concentrating at work. Maybe you have a hard time staying in conversations when they turn to conflict with a partner or friend. Maybe you get defensive or angry.

Do you get lost in thought instead of being present? Maybe you're always thinking about the next thing you're going to say instead of truly listening during a conversation. Or maybe, like me, you find yourself out of touch with your own feelings.

I realized about a decade ago that I was often irritable without realizing it. That was a sign of depression and anxiety for me and I couldn't even see it because I was so in it. Both my science brain and my witchy heart are huge fans of mindfulness and meditation, and these tools are the vital first step to changing your thoughts and managing your mind.

So, let's start by defining terms here. I define mindfulness as coming into awareness, being aware of the present moment, acknowledging what's happening right now, and accepting your thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they are. Meditation is defined as the action or practice of meditating, which is kind of just like taking mindfulness to a different degree.

So today, I want to focus on mindfulness as a step on the road to meditating and to getting in touch with our minds and being more present in our lives. I want to introduce the concept of being our own watcher; a term I first heard from the writer Eckhart Tolle. I devoured his books when they

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first came out. And I want to give a shout-out to Oprah for teaching me about him. Thank you, Oprah, for all you do.

And his work has deeply shaped my understanding of who I am in this world. This quote really struck me and has stayed with me, “Be the silent watcher of your thoughts and behavior. You are beneath the thinker. You are the stillness beneath the mental noise. You are the love and joy beneath the pain.” Wow, that just floors me every time I read it.

So, this concept that we have the capacity to step back and observe our thoughts in order to develop a more intentional response to them blows my mind. So many of us walk through life totally unaware of our thoughts, our feelings, and how our bodies feel in any given moment, let alone what any of this means for our emotional and physical wellness and the decisions we make throughout our day.

When emotions are heightened or we're feeling triggered because of past traumas, it can feel especially impossible to slow down, watch, and reassess why we're responding the way we are. But here's the truth; you are not your thoughts. Your thoughts happen in your brain and are formed from your past lived experiences. But you are not your thoughts.

Your thoughts and feelings are a part of you, absolutely, but they don't define you. Because I think anxious thoughts, I come to feel anxious, but that doesn't mean that I am anxious. It means I'm experiencing the symptoms of anxiety, not that I am anxiety personified or that I am an anxious person. I'm simply a human thinking anxious thoughts that are leading to anxious feelings.

I don't have to identify with those thoughts and make them mean something about me. They're just thoughts and feelings happening on autopilot. If you're allowing yourself to believe that you are your thoughts and your feelings, then however can you change the way you feel?

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When I take a step back and become my own watcher, I can create that space to observe myself. I can assess and evaluate where my thoughts are coming from and I can intentionally decide how I will respond to those thoughts and can get clear on how I may or may not be bringing past experiences or coping mechanisms into the current moment unnecessarily.

This is a complex process to learn. I get it. Sometimes thoughts can feel automatic, like sadness, anger, frustration, or judgmental thoughts and feelings. There was a time in my life when judgmental thoughts were my absolute norm. I wasn't even aware I was doing it.

I had some comment to make about everyone and everything in the world, about someone's fashion or someone's comment in class. Things like, "Wow, way to prove that there are dumb questions..." or, "Oh my god, was her apartment on fire when she got dressed this morning?" That's something I used to actually say. It's a little embarrassing to say it out loud to all of you, but there it is.

And then, one of my best friends pointed this habit out to me by saying, "When we judge others harshly, we are likely judging ourselves twice as hard." That hit me like a ton of bricks. I was so not being my watcher. I was not present to or aware of the comments I was making and the way it made me feel about myself and the world around me.

It turns out, I was judging myself pretty harshly, constantly, without even realizing it. I was projecting that insecurity outward onto the world by being the funny guy. Without even realizing it, I was covering up my own fear of being judged by judging others first, and this practice was hurting me in deep ways, though I didn't even realize it.

Increasing mindfulness, getting present in my life on the daily, was the first step in recognizing the habitual thoughts and feelings that were running through my mind without my even knowing it. And this practice of

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mindfulness was difficult for me at first because I used to be this constantly moving, acting, going, going, going, like the Energizer Bunny personified.

I was a go-getter, often going in the wrong direction without pausing to think it through. Slowing down and learning to observe my thoughts has helped me to reclaim power over my own mind and decide what I want to think, say, feel, and not just continue to believe that my thoughts were some kind of fact.

And the truth is that, for so many of us, it's so hard to sit still. It's hard to witness our own thoughts, because when we do, we're forced to sit with ourselves, and that can be uncomfortable. Human brains and bodies are wired to avoid discomfort at all costs. And being still and present with our own thoughts is one of the hardest things that any of us can do. But it's also one of the most vital first steps in getting to know ourselves, to build self-love, empowerment, and to begin being able to examine our habits and the automatic thoughts that occupy our mind all day.

So, let's dig into why you might want to develop a mindfulness practice. First, we have to get clear on why we're doing it and what we want to get out of it, so that when it feels hard, we have an anchor, a good reason to keep going. So, mindfulness helps us examine and better understand our automatic thoughts, assumptions, and reactions; this concept of being your own watcher.

What I want most for you, my love, is for you to learn to start to notice yourself and your thoughts as well as your automatic feelings that come up when you least expect them. Your feelings come from your prior experiences; your history.

I like to think of our unconscious mind as having a series of cassette tapes in it about how to think and feel. And these cassette tapes contain our thoughts at any given moment. These tapes are put in your head at an

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early age and may, for example, play a sad song about how you're unlovable if someone cancels plans, or like a self-pity or why me song that starts when your belly hurts after a meal. Or it could be like an angry death metal song that starts when you see your ex on social media and you start to spin about how you'll die cold and alone since that jerk abandoned you.

Each of these soundtracks comes from our history and your brain trying to protect you from feeling uncomfortable. And here's the good news; you can rerecord them. You can record over those old tapes to play a song that's more in line with what you want for your life.

Two, mindfulness helps us build up our ability to sit in discomfort and fear so we can choose different reactions to those experiences in other areas of our lives. That is, we don't just get mindful so we can be good at being mindful. We welcome in mindfulness so we can get good at living.

And I want to say it plainly; this is hard at first. It's uncomfortable, especially when you start to see things about yourself that you do not love or even like. Take comfort that there's no perfect way to do this. You can't fail at mindfulness. Like, you just can't do it wrong. All you'll be doing is paying attention so you can make choices in this life instead of always playing the cassette tape your brain has always played.

Why let your brain be the DJ? I mean, I want to be my own DJ. Alright, what do I want to play? I want to play some Sonic Youth, followed by Tribe, and then maybe some Ana Tijoux... Okay, wait, hold on, sorry, I got totally off-track building my playlist. But the point is, the daily practice of being your own watcher sets you up to take a few deep breaths before getting defensive when you're talking with your boss, before yelling at your kids, or taking some random comment personally.

Taking a few deep breaths each day helps you to not go to that panic place when you have a different than usual belly pain or when you feel those

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period cramps coming on. Mindfulness helps us to make peace with our human bodies and to be the watchers of our human minds; not the subject of our thoughts, but an actor, able to see what our brains are doing out of habit, fear, self-preservation, and to help us pause so we can choose the next right thing instead of just doing what we've always done.

So, how can we get more mindful? There are several things I do to help myself get present and to be my own watcher. One, remove the adjectives. So, one of my favorite tools is to state my experience without adjectives or other descriptive words. I had this habit, many moons ago, of adding adjectives to my experience of the world versus just staying present and neutral about things.

For example, I would look out the window on a day like today and say, "There's so much ice and snow on the sidewalk and it's so gross and annoying..." versus just accepting that it's winter in New York and that snow exists. I can choose to be annoyed by the facts of what is. I can choose to get all ruffled up about it. Or, I can recognize that these tiny stories of annoyance add up to feeling pretty lousy about my world.

Now, I've trained myself to look out the window and say, "There is snow on the ground. Time to put on my Doc Martins, period, end of story." And that feels a lot more peaceful than all the grumbling I was doing, especially about things that I cannot change. Now, I work to name what I'm experiencing versus judging it.

I'm not denying or negating that there's winter, there's snow, there's ice, and it's cold out there. I'm not sitting in constant judgment, I'm just not focusing on it like I used to. I'm not telling elaborate stories about facts in the world. I'm just accepting the world as it is.

And I pause to be the watcher of my own thoughts too. So if I find myself, on a given Wednesday, looking in the mirror and being like, erg about my

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weight or a pimple I've gotten or something that I don't like about the way I look, instead of saying to myself, "Why am I looking in the mirror and being such a judgmental stupid beast?" I might choose, "Oh, okay, I'm thinking a judgmental thought right now. That's what I'm doing."

Or if, like, I don't know, I'm prepping for a podcast and my brain is telling an overwhelm story and I'm not able to focus clearly, instead of saying, "Damn it, Vic, why can't you focus? Why am I thinking 1000 thoughts right now? Why is my brain going a million miles an hour? Why does my brain keep jumping between 27 things?" I might opt, first and foremost, for stepping into that watcher place and saying, "Okay, here's where we are. My brain is jumping all over the place. This is the fact of what's happening right now."

You see the difference there? It's stepping out of that judgment about what my mind is doing so I can focus on observing it, on acknowledging it, and creating distance by being my own watcher and naming what my brain is doing.

Now, I'm not expecting, or even encouraging you, to stop these judgmental habits, these innate habits immediately. I just want to encourage you to notice them, to watch your brain thinking without judgment or criticism of yourself. Your homework for the week is to start applying these techniques to the little things in your daily life, to get more present, and to learn to watch your brain in its wild use of extraordinary adjectives.

Some good opportunities for you to practice may be when you're in conversation with someone. Let your mind go blank. Just focus on hearing the other person instead of focusing on what you're planning to say next. If having your mind go blank is too challenging at first, that's cool, no big deal.

A trick you can use to get started is to repeat what you're hearing them say in your own mind. Focus on each word as you hear it and let it sink in. That

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will help get you present into the watcher place where you can see your mind trying to absorb this information, versus being in that planner place, where you're really focused on yourself and your role.

Another option could be when you're walking to the subway or to your car this week. Take a moment to look up at the sky, or look at the things and people around you, and notice them. I recommend naming them, to again, create that bit of distance; blue car, green bike, squirrel. You don't have to do anything more than notice things.

Naming the things we see helps us train our brain to be more present and aware. When you're having your morning coffee, tea, celery juice, if you're on that bandwagon, take a deep breath. Feel your feet on the floor or your body in your seat. Connect in with your spine and feel it holding you up. Feel the weight of the cup in your hand, the temperature of it. Smell your beverage. Take a taste. Feel it going down your throat and into your belly. Really take it in and get present to your body.

If you find yourself in a moment that feels difficult, pause, breathe, notice any tension in your body, any thoughts racing through your mind. You don't have to do anything about what you're feeling. For now, you just need to get present to it. If you have the space to write down your observations in a journal or notebook, or even in that note section on your phone, do that.

Writing helps us to create space between our thoughts and our connection with those thoughts. It helps us to get a little cognitive distance; that is distance between ourselves and the thoughts our brains are automatically thinking. I'll be talking a lot about journaling in episodes to come, so starting the practice now can help you apply these teachings as I lay them out each week.

Remember, my loves, mindfulness sets us up to move with the ebbs and flows of life, rather than letting life be a constant and ever-looming tsunami

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on the horizon. Being present helps us to create distance before reacting so we can respond in a calm and centered way that is aligned with our values and our desires for our best life. And that feels pretty darn amazing.

Thanks for listening. I hope this episode's been helpful for you. Do your homework this week. Take a moment to get present each day with your surroundings. Start to notice your thoughts. Start to write them down. Start to see what your brain is doing when it's on autopilot, when those old cassette tapes that were recorded by your mom or your dad, by society, by our culture. Start to see those cassette tapes and the string of thoughts that go racing through your brain without your even paying attention.

You get to be the actor in your life, and the first step is to get present to it all. Be kind to yourself, and in this process, please remember, when we heal ourselves, we can help heal the world.

To celebrate the launch of the show, I'm going to be giving away five sets of my handcrafted organic essential oil rollers; the energizing blend, called Rise and Shine, and a gorgeous blend I use when I feel tension, stress, or anxiety called Easy Now, that I also use when I need a little help falling asleep. So, I'm going to be giving away one set of each to five lucky listeners who subscribe, rate, and review the show on iTunes.

It doesn't have to be a five-star review, although I sure hope you love the show. I want your honest feedback so I can create an awesome program that provides tons of value. Visit victoriaalbina.com/itunes to learn more about the contest and how to enter. I'll be announcing the winners on the show in an upcoming episode. Be well, my loves. See you next time, and have a beautiful week.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of Feminist Wellness. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.