Active Pause

Active Pause Series

With Serge Prengel

Editor's Note: Many of our readers do not follow our website or Facebook page. With this in mind, SPT Magazine is offering the first three of Serge Prengel's Active Pause articles in one PDF so the flow from one to the next is maintained for our offline readers. We invite you to follow us online as Serge will continue to offer articles in the Active Pause series.

Active Pause® Part 1: The pause as part of a mindful process

This is the first in a series of articles about the power of the pause in life and in therapy. In this article, I talk about why I am calling this kind of pause Active Pause, instead of just calling it a pause.

In a nutshell, because the word 'pause' alone doesn't do it justice. In everyday language, what we call a pause is a moment where activity is suspended, i.e. something that we associate with a blank as opposed to activity. I use the word 'active' to make the point that the pause is not just a 'blank' but an intentional rupture from the status quo, the flow of things as they currently are.

Without rupture, there is no possibility of a breakthrough. If the pause were just a pause, in the ordinary sense of the term, what comes after it would be pretty much the same as what comes before it. But the value of the pause is that it allows for disruption, for the possibility of change.

Another way to express this is to see the pause as part of a larger process. Talking about process need not be a complex philosophical discussion. For instance, think about sleep. If we narrowly focus on sleep as opposed to awake moments, sleep is a blank moment, a lack of activity. However, we have a different perspective if we think of sleep within the context of the process of what keeps an organism alive and well-functioning. Sleep is an essential part of this larger process. It is part of the rhythm of life and refreshes us. So does the pause.

I am inviting you to look at the pause within the context of the process through which we interact with our environment. I am going to use a metaphor to make this more concrete. Let's imagine that the flow of information that comes at us, as we interact with our environment, is represented by the metaphor of a mighty river.

If the floodgates are open, we get totally flooded, overwhelmed. The information is no use to us. The experience is actually destructive.

On the other hand, if the gates are closed, we get no information whatsoever. We get no experience, no benefit from experience.

To benefit from the mighty river without being flooded by it, we need to be open able to open and close the floodgates at will, in order to regulate the flow of information. We are regulating our relationship with experience in order to integrate it optimally.

We use floodgates to allow for optimal irrigation and make agriculture possible. But this process of regulation is not just technological process. This is not just a human process. It is a natural process, one that we share with other animals. It is very clear if you observe how we, or animals, drink.

The bottle is open, and gravity gets the water to flow down to our mouth. As we drink, we take pauses to shift from bringing water into the mouth to conveying it inside the organism:
– If we were totally open, nonstop, we'd be flooded,
– If we were totally closed, nonstop, we'd get no water,
– It works because we're able to regulate the intake of water. It's so natural, a child does it without being taught.

We're talking about regulating the flow of experience. The pause, as we absorb information, is the same phenomenon: We regulate the flow of experience, so we have the benefit of it without being flooded by it.

Next article: If the pause is a natural part of the human process, does it mean it always comes easily to us?

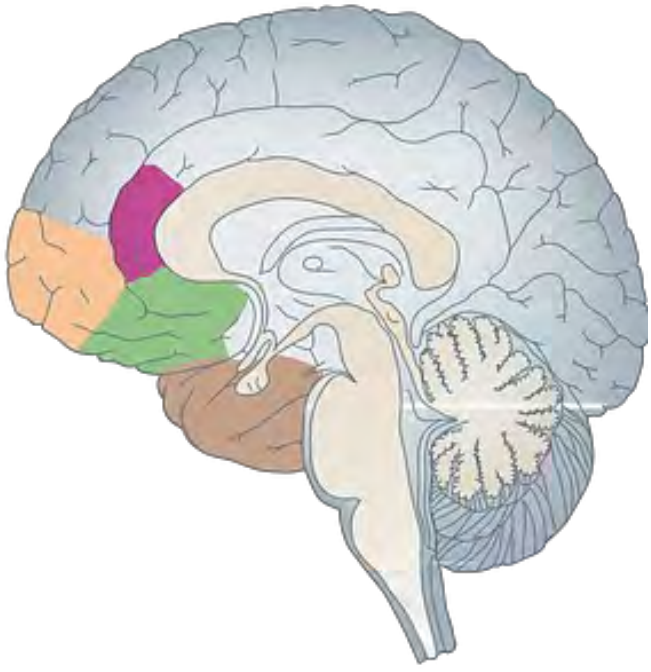
Active Pause® Part 2: If the pause is a natural part of the human process, does it mean it always comes easily to us?

We rightly talk about the pause as being a natural part of the human process – – it is a ‘natural pause’. However, because it is natural does not mean it always comes easily. If we are not aware of how difficult it can be to actually pause, we get painfully surprised when it is difficult to pause. As we better understand the difficulty inherent in taking a pause, we can be better prepared to do it effectively.

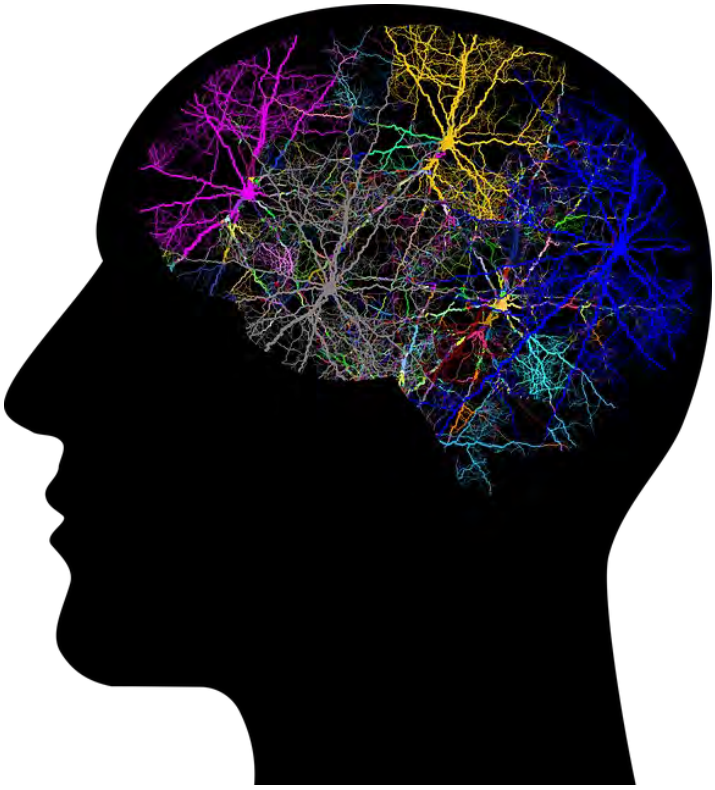
So, what is it that can override a natural process that is so important to our ability to integrate experience? In a word, fear. Before describing this process, I will be putting the topic within the larger context of how the brain works.

Fear is not inherently bad. In fact, it is a very powerful feature that has tremendous survival value. It is what happens in fight-or-flight, i.e. when the sympathetic nervous system is activated. This is a knee-jerk reaction that has developed in all animals to help us survive in case of clear and present danger.

For instance, when an antelope encounters a lion, it is very useful for it to have instant access to flight. For a human being, it is very useful to reflexively remember ‘I’ve been burnt’ in order to avoid touching fire. And it’s also essential to have access to our anger when we need to fight. The parts of our brain that are involved in this reactive mode, such as the amygdala, are evolutionarily very old.



Much more recent evolutionarily are the parts of the human brain that allow for a broader assessment of the situation, beyond the knee-jerk reaction to danger. Neural circuits in the frontal cortex allow us to determine that, even though a given situation feels like a major threat, it is not actually that threatening. This allows us to downgrade from Red Alert to something more appropriate.



What I call the proactive mindset is the human ability to engage the more evolved neural circuits and perform a sort of due diligence to improve the quality of the information that we get through the reactive mindset. I am not talking about ignoring our more primitive reactions, far from that. I am talking about building on these primitive reactions. Instead of reacting impulsively, we use the reactive impulse as a starting point for a more sophisticated process that helps us respond more effectively to a given situation.

The proactive mindset I describe can also be seen as mindfulness. Given how some people think of mindfulness as an esoteric practice, it is important to state that what I am describing here is a natural human ability: The ability to function more effectively, by discriminating more clearly what is a manageable threat from what is not, and adopting more appropriate responses.

Now, how do we do this? Of course, it helps to have an awareness of this process, and the intention to shift from a reactive mode. It helps, but it isn't nearly enough. Because we are talking about overriding a very powerful mechanism, one that has been reinforced by millions of years of evolution. This mechanism enables us to mobilize enormous amounts of energy in the service of survival when we face what we perceive as a major threat. The bigger the perceived threat, the more impossibly difficult the task will feel. Pushing against the fear will only increase the sense of pressure and danger and make it even more difficult to override the reactive impulses.

When you're reactive, you may not perceive your reactivity as fear. For instance, you may feel confused. Or feel stuck. Or you may be very angry, even angry to the point of being scary to other people… so that doesn't sound like you're afraid, does it? So, let's not call that fear. Let's just call it 'intense emotion, related to a sense of threat'. The point is: It is the very intensity of the emotion that makes it hard to override.

How does one deal with this? I'm going to take a simple example, one where the 'threat' can be managed relatively easily. I'm going to talk about what happens when you start wearing contact lenses, how you get accustomed to inserting them into your eyes.

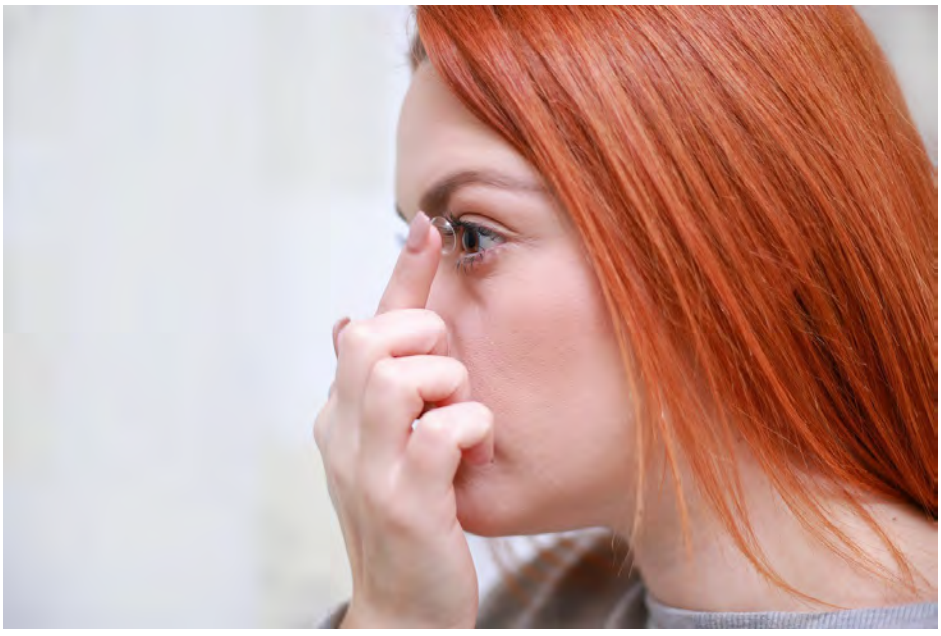
You put the lens on the tip of a finger, and you start moving the index finger toward your eye. You notice that, even though you're moving your index slowly, and even though you know that this is not an attack on your eye, you automatically close your eyelids as the finger is approaching. So you need to pull down the lower eyelid with one finger of the hand that has the lens, and pull up the upper eyelid with the other hand, to keep the eye open.

Even as you do this, and even though the movement of your finger toward your eye is slow and controlled, you notice that the eye has a tendency to close despite the fingers holding the eyelids open. Fortunately, over time, this operation becomes easier and easier, as your mind learns from experience that there is no risk.

This learning is possible because a lot of conditions are gathered to override the reactive impulse to the perceived attack. For one thing, there is the reassuring knowledge that this procedure is one that has been done by millions of other people, and that the medical profession is behind it. But also, the finger that moves toward your eye is your own, so you can modulate the movement; in other words, there is less of a threat because you have control over the movement. The need for a protective reaction is lessened as you feel safer.

Conversely, you wouldn't be able to relax enough to keep your eye open if somebody else's finger was coming at you really fast. It would be impossible to override the perception that this is an attack.

So, in order to override reactivity, you need to feel safer. This doesn't happen through logic alone. Logic helps, of course, as it does in the case of contact lenses: It helps to know that eye doctors think of this as a safe procedure. But it is not enough. What is necessary is the experience of actually feeling safe, so that the powerful protection circuits of the brain can relax their grip and make change possible. Remember that these protective circuits are those we share with other animals, they're more primitive than our cortical circuits, they're not good at the subtleties of complex thought. To overcome reactivity, you need to experience a visceral sense of safety, because the function of reactivity is to protect you.



This visceral sense of safety, and a visceral understanding of the intense emotions that have a grip on you, cannot be fully accessed when we try to get at them by only using words, logical discourse. This is because the brain circuits involved in these emotions are more primitive. So, we need to pay attention to moment-by-moment physical experience. We need to keep coming back to that, as opposed to staying solely at the level of ‘talking about’ what might be happening.

In the example I gave, that of becoming progressively more comfortable inserting a contact lens, comfort with the procedure comes from repeatedly practicing it in a mindful way.

What is that mindful practice? Is it sufficient to just have a ‘mindful practice’, such as mediation, or yoga, or Focusing? It would probably help some, but it wouldn’t be enough to replace the specific practice of inserting the lens. The more intense the potential danger, the more our reactive circuits take over, bypassing the circuits that counterbalance reactivity. In other words: The more intense the potential danger, the more we need to train our mind to recognize that this specific danger is safer than it appears to us.

Why am I calling this a ‘mindful practice’, as opposed to just ‘training’? Let’s pay attention to what happens when we practice inserting the contact lens with our finger. As described earlier in this text, it is something we do slowly, carefully. There are micro-movements forward, interrupted by micro-pauses. The micro-pauses allow us to get a moment-by-moment assessment of the situation.

Think of the images at the beginning of this section, the gates regulating the flow of water. The micro-pauses allow our nervous system to process the advance of the potential threat (the finger), in the context of its ability to control the threat (pausing).

There is no attunement possible without these micro-pauses, because they are what makes it possible to process the potential threat in manageable bites. At a macro level as well as a micro level, the pause gives our nervous system the moment-by-moment realization that we can regulate the flow of experience, that we can make it safe, hence we can open up to it in an optimal way in order to integrate it.

My next article will discuss the pause as a defining moment

Active Pause® Part 3: The Pause as a Redefining Moment

By Serge Prengel

This article is part 3 of a continuing series about Active Pause. In part 2, I showed how the pause is part and parcel of the process of integrating our experience. Here, I will be describing it as a redefining moment. It is a perspective I like to share with clients, to put our work in context.

As a concrete example, I will use a situation described by Mary Hendricks Gendlin. A first-time mother is in the hospital shortly after giving birth to her daughter. Her husband had to leave right after birth, so she is by herself when the hospital staff tells her that the baby has jaundice. They want to give the baby a shot. It doesn't feel quite right to her, so she does not rush into it and questions the staff. Their arguments do not convince her. However, the hospital staff is persistent. The mother experiences herself as alone against the weight of medical wisdom and authority. It is against such pressure that she decides against the shot.

Later, the mother finds out that her decision made sense medically. However, she does not have that information at the time she is in the hospital. In this article, what matters is to understand why she does with the limited information she has, in the context of unrelenting pressure from the medical staff.

What she does is take a pause. At a gut level, she feels a deep sense of uneasiness. Deep, but fuzzy: she's not yet able to articulate what it is. All she knows from previous experience is that it makes sense to take a pause when she starts sensing something like that.

Taking a pause allows her to give more attention to what is still murky and faint. It enables her to notice the pressure. To you, the reader, this may seem evident. It had not been apparent to her before. Think about it from her perspective. You're in the hospital, people are taking care of you, and telling you what to do is part of taking care of you. What could be more reasonable?

As she pauses, she starts to experience things differently. She no longer takes it for granted that she has to follow instructions. Now, she perceives the situation as a confrontation, with an overhanging sense of threat. The risk is significant: we're talking about the health of a newborn child. The mother is alone against the medical staff.

"I" exist and "I want." This is not an abstract notion but a deeply felt experience.

This mother was Mary Hendricks Gendlin herself. In her retelling of the story, she emphasized how the new mother was alone against the staff, the hospital, the medical world. She was alone against what felt like the weight of collective wisdom: trust medicine. So, Mary called what she did "the revolutionary pause." She saw such moments as an opportunity for individuals to stand up for themselves against societal norms that are all the more oppressive because the oppression is hidden.

Emphasizing the social and political dimensions does not mean that Mary was oblivious to the psychological aspect. To the contrary. As a psychologist and a Focuser, Mary was aware of the complexities of inner experience. She wanted to put the psychological within a broader context. The struggle to be oneself is not just intrapersonal or interpersonal. It also has to do with the society we live in and the pressures this imposes on us. These pressures affect our individual experience, whether we are conscious of them or not.

Let us go now back to re-examine what happens in the story told by Mary, from the perspective of it being a redefining moment.

In the beginning, she is emotionally flooded. This is understandable. It feels excruciating to go against accepted wisdom when the stakes are high. Pressure and fear prevent us from seeing that there may be an opportunity to make a choice. We tend to be reactive rather than develop a thoughtful response to the challenge. Responding, as opposed to reacting, requires taking some time to gain a broader perspective and consider options.

The Emerging Self

As the saying goes, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If you don't collapse in the face of unrelenting pressure, you experience yourself as having agency.

The mother decides that she does not have to rush into giving the baby a shot for jaundice. As she stands up against the pressure, she experiences a strong sense of self. She describes it as a revolutionary resistance to oppression. Politically, this is what happened when the American colonies resisted English oppression and emerged as a country. This concept can just as well be described in psychological terms. It involves the sense that "I" exist and "I want." This is not an abstract notion but a deeply felt experience.

The stakes in this example are high. So, we have no trouble thinking of it as a "defining moment." It is a moment the mother will remember long afterward, as the moment where she stood up against authority. She took a risk to do what she felt was best for her daughter, as opposed to doing what she was told.

In this case, the sense of self coalesced around the experience of saying no to the shot. What makes it defining is not a specific decision. If the mother had eventually decided to yield to medical advice after pausing, it would still be a defining moment. Her experience would have been that of feeling overwhelmed by the risk, not wanting to take that responsibility, wanting to be sheltered by the voice of authority. That too would be a deeply felt defining moment, anything but an abstraction.

It comes to us more naturally to call 'defining moments' those moments when we break from the mold. But it is equally defining, in the sense of helping us know who we are, to have experiences where we realize that we do not have the stuff it takes to break from the mold.

Such moments are a breakthrough, a rupture, a paradigm shift. Compared to dramatic moments such as the one Mary described, most of what happens after we pause in our everyday life is relatively trivial. Yet, I like to think of what happens after any pause as a "redefining moment." Not because it changes your whole outlook on life. But because it makes you reconsider your relationship with what is happening to you.

In the flow of moment-by-moment experience, a mindful pause is a rupture of continuity. At this moment, there is a reassessment, a conscious reorientation. No matter how small the shift, and even if there is no actual change, it is an opportunity to have the felt experience of "I am" and "I decide what to do." Or: "I face the situation; therefore, I am."

I also want to clarify that, when I talk about "sense of self" and "defining moment," I do not mean that there was no sense of self before. I am talking about the unfolding of our experience of "self," as we redefine ourselves based on how we respond to our circumstances.

These Are Not Abstractions

Words such as meaning, purpose, self, or defining moments are not philosophical abstractions. They refer to deeply felt experiences that we notice when we pay attention to our experience moment by moment.

The sense of intense pressure that the young mother feels in the story is not an abstract concept. We are talking about genuine fear. It is the crucible of intense emotions that shapes the emerging sense of self.

Mindful engagement with life entails experiencing painful feelings, as opposed to being dissociated from them. It involves experiencing the "fight or flight" reaction that comes naturally to us when we face significant threats. Millions of years of evolution have deeply ingrained "fight or flight" in our direct ancestors, as well as in the more primitive animals that preceded them. The ability to confront danger, or run away from it if it is overwhelming, has enormous survival value. So, it is part of our genetic heritage, something that is difficult to override.

I also want to clarify that, when I talk about "sense of self" and "defining moment," I do not mean that there was no sense of self before. I am talking about the unfolding of our experience of "self," as we redefine ourselves based on how we respond to our circumstances.

The situation depicted in the story is a significant threat. We are talking about the health of a precious newborn child. Under intense danger, our nervous system goes into emergency mode. Knee-jerk reactivity comes from the "rapid response" part of our nervous system, as opposed to the circuits that process more complex information. Think about it this way. Imagine you are in antelope, and you smell a lion. It is much more useful for you to automatically run away than to start exploring whether or not this smell might be misleading. Otherwise, you might get killed and eaten before you have found an answer to the issue.

Reactivity is a great advantage when there is a real danger. However, in our ordinary lives, the threats we face are often not situations that require this kind of hair-trigger reactivity. More often than not, it works better for us to take a moment to assess the situation. Doing this means being proactive rather than reactive.

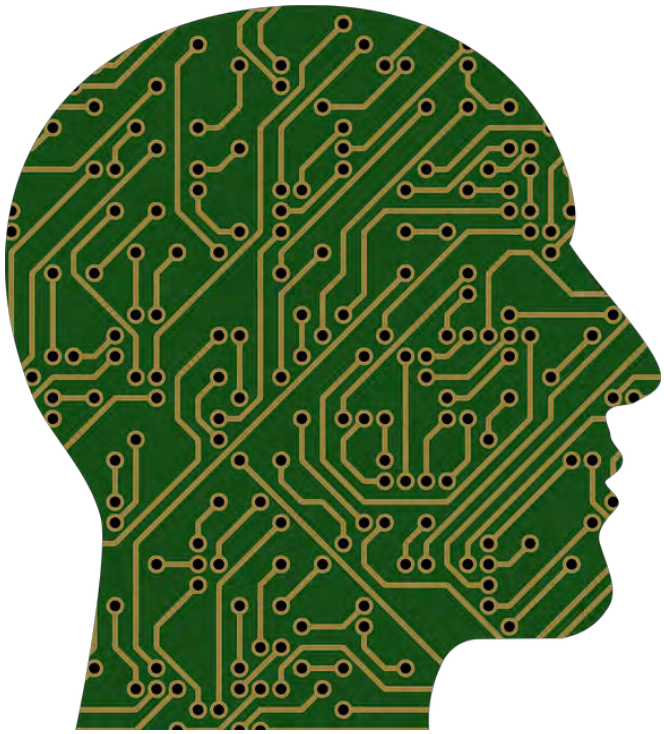
Overriding the Reactive Mode

What is it that enables us to avail ourselves of this great resource, pausing, in times when we experience threat?

There has to be a part of us, even a tiny part, that can step back: "Wait a minute!" It is necessary to interrupt the circuit of reactivity to give ourselves a chance to elaborate a potentially better response.

In Mary's story, what made it possible for the young mother to override her reactivity? She had developed the ability to be mindful. In her case, it came from the practice of Focusing. Over time, she had developed the ability to pay attention to her felt sense, very subtle information coming from inside. Thus, when she was talking to the hospital staff, she was able to experience a subtle felt sense, the sense that something didn't quite feel right. It's a subtle sense that most of us don't pay attention to because it doesn't come with the loudness and the clarity of an explicit warning.

It is hard to ignore flashing red lights and loudspeakers blaring: "Watch it! Danger!" It is much more difficult to notice some kind of a subtle queasy feeling in your stomach. Especially when the situation is so intense that paying attention to subtle sensations might feel like wasting precious time. The natural urge then is to concentrate on the threat, not the inner experience.



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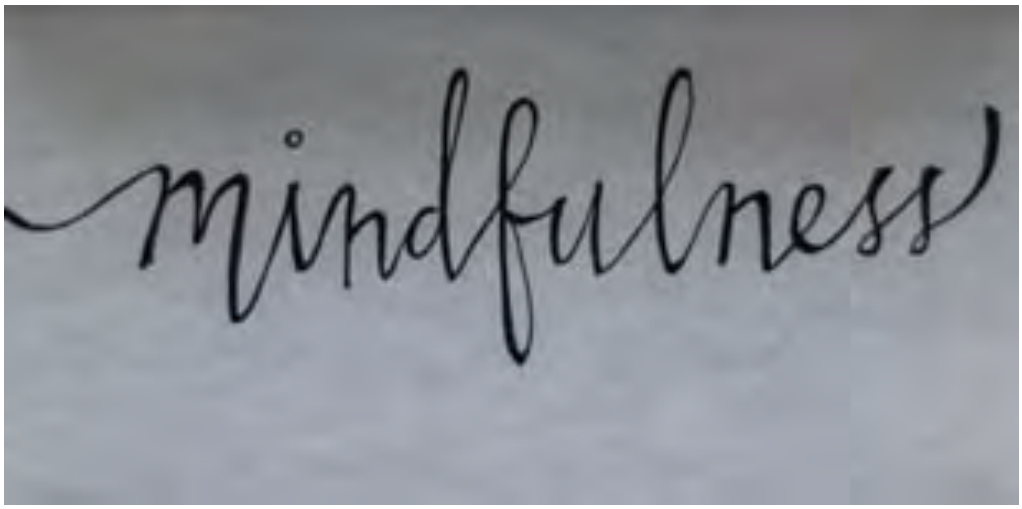
But Mary was accustomed to paying attention to this kind of felt sense. She knew, at a gut level, that attending to a felt sense improved her ability to respond to the situation. She knew from repeated experience that the pause didn't have to last very long for it to be effective. It is impressive how fast you get information from the felt sense once you stop ignoring it and pay attention to it.

You take a moment to be attentive to that queasy feeling in your stomach. Right away, you get some sense that "something's not right here." You don't know what is not right, but you know it's good to attend to it.

It's a "Wait a minute!" moment. You feel: "Something's not quite right. I need a moment to sense into it." It's not that you know the specifics of what is not right. Not yet. All you know is that it's okay to take a moment. It's more than okay. You need to take a moment. So, you push back against internal pressure or pressure from others. Firmly. Gently if you can, more forcefully when needed. You are not doing this to be negative, rebellious, rejecting other people's suggestions. You simply need to make a space to hear yourself sense and feel and think.



In Practice

The theory is straightforward: All you have to remember is that you need to take a mindful pause when there is a threat or pressure. In practice, it is not so easy to do when the situation is intense. What makes it difficult is that it takes overwriting the potent reactive mechanism that millions of years of evolution have honed to perfection. Therefore, the pause is something that you have to train for so that it is available to you as a resource when you need it most.

In the story, what helped the mother was her previous training in Focusing. Practicing mindfulness is an excellent way to train our nervous system to override reactivity. Essentially, the practice of mindfulness enables us to notice our reactivity and to shift our attention.

Practicing mindfulness develops our ability to engage the nervous system circuits that can assess information in a more sophisticated way than the reactive circuits. Mindfulness practice, in general, is beneficial to help override reactivity. Focusing is especially helpful in developing our capacity to be mindful in everyday life.

Serge Prengel, LMHC, is in private practice in New York City. He has been exploring creative approaches to mindfulness in therapy and in everyday life: how to live with an embodied sense of meaning and purpose. Serge is a graduate of France's Sorbonne University and HEC School. He is certified in Focusing, Core Energetics and Somatic Experiencing, and also draws from Systems-Centered theory. Serge is the editor of the Relational Implicit podcast.

My next article will discuss getting in touch with experience as an embodied, mindful process.

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Active Pause® Part 2: If the pause is a natural part of the human process, does it mean it always comes easily to us?

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