

# The Differences between Mindfulness, Flow, and Hypnosis

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In the helter-skelter of daily living, many of us feel like we're playing Whack-a-Mole on the "insane" speed level, lacking even sufficient time to stop, think, and plan. When we rush around thoughtlessly (or think in hyper mode), our relationships seem like drive-by soul touches, and our work can feel meaningless because we don't have the space to address the true challenges it holds...

This is nothing new. You've heard it a dozen times, and you probably skimmed right through that paragraph with an eyeroll at yet another lament about the state of modern society and how mindless we can be in our zombified quotidian existences. But, that's actually just the standard contrast that gets used whenever people try to define "mindfulness." That is, most people understand the notion of mindfulness as being juxtaposed to *mindlessness* (cf. Brown & Ryan, 2003), and hence the comparisons with typical daily life. But, the suggestion that mindfulness and mindlessness are opposites incites people to find mindfulness in such a wide range of contexts, moments, and places that the definition of mindfulness becomes incredibly loose. As such, people start conflating mindfulness, hypnosis, flow, meditation, and everything else that seems to be on the opposite end of the spectrum from the alleged defaults of putting-out-fires or staring blankly into space.

As such, it might help just to put some boundaries around these constructs so we can all make sure we're on the same page.

For a start, where the confusion begins to arise is in the role of attention in all three constructs, as they all require a significant degree of focus. Thinking of mindfulness, flow, and hypnosis as being functions of focus that are applied in different ways is what underlies the mess, so that is where the unpacking needs to start. Instead of conceiving of attention as a single construct, treat it as comprising two different functions, one of which is concentration, and the other of which is monitoring (i.e., awareness of one's context).

## ***Mindfulness***

Originating in the Buddhist concept of *sati*, mindfulness relates to memory or keeping something in mind. In recent research, mindfulness has multiple conceptions, ranging from active cognitive processes to more passive observation (see Brown & Ryan, 2003, and Bishop et al., 2004, for overviews), but all of them involve paying careful and active attention to the *present moment*. For instance, Kabat-Zinn (1994) described mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (cf. Kabat-Zinn, 2011). This openness is a reference to the *monitoring* aspect of attention, and necessarily covers a broader range of potential objects [of focus; cf. Lutz et al., 2015]. As such, mindfulness is explicitly not directed at a particular goal.

Incidentally, Chiesa's (2012) review of the history of mindfulness and Western conceptions of it reveals several problems with the definition above (cf. Grossman, 2011). The first is that, according to Chiesa, mindfulness is *not* a morally-/ethically-neutral construct -- its development is associated

with the concurrent development of ethically positive traits like loving kindness and compassion (cf. Gilpin, 2009, which cites the [Sutta Pitaka](#)). The second problem is the utter lack of agreement among the various conceptions of mindfulness -- it ranges so far that some of the scales that measure it don't even correlate with each other. As Chiesa notes:

*In sum, according to classical literature, mindfulness concerns a lucid awareness of what is occurring within the phenomenological field and meditation plays a key role in the development of mindfulness. In particular, for the correct development of mindfulness, both concentrative and open monitoring skills should be developed with the main aim of keeping the mind anchored to present moment experience and perceiving an experience in its stark form free from one's own projections and misunderstandings. Finally, an attitude of acceptance is thought to facilitate and to be the result of the development of both mindfulness and concentration. (p. 258)*

## ***Hypnosis***

Trying to get a straight definition of hypnosis is harder than herding cats. Folks in APA's [Div. 30](#) have been going back and forth for decades over exactly how hypnosis should be defined, and the formal definition has changed significantly multiple times in the past decade (see [here](#), but also the response of Lynn et al., 2015). About the only two things most, if not all, hypnotists agree upon is that hypnosis involves both absorption and response to suggestions (Div. 30's [primer](#) on the subject). Insofar as response to suggestion is key in hypnosis, but does not require being in the present (e.g., age regression), this is a key difference between mindfulness and hypnosis. The two can be directed to overlap, but do not by default. Moreover, in hypnosis, one may sometimes perceive one's actions as involuntary (but see Kihlstrom [2008] for a discussion of automaticity), whereas mindfulness is generally associated with a strengthened sense of voluntary choice and agency (see Brown & Ryan, 2003, and Brewer, 2017).

In this, we see that hypnosis, by dint of involving response to suggestion, is goal-directed behavior (unlike mindfulness), and also requires a degree of absorption that *excludes* many of the percepts and happenings in the local environment (also unlike mindfulness). Although some definitions of mindfulness consider the ability to concentrate necessary for maintaining awareness of the present, this is different from the use of concentration in hypnosis, which uses absorption to eliminate awareness of the present so as to focus on specific thoughts, sensations, or behaviors. (In fact, Semmens-Wheeler [2013; cf. Dienes et al., 2015] points to a negative correlation between hypnosis and measures of mindfulness!)

## ***Flow***

Get your lasso ready, because trying to define flow is yet another exercise in wrangling disputed constructs. What a decent number agree upon, however, is that flow involves deep focus and an experience of effortless action while engaging in an intrinsically-rewarding (to at least some degree) activity with a clear goal, some indicator of whether that goal is being met, and in which one loses awareness of the self as the entity participating in the activity (i.e., the individual becomes part of the activity rather than being an individual actor). Here again, we see goal-directed behavior differentiating between flow and mindfulness. Moreover, while flow typically requires focusing on the present surroundings and being in the moment, it is possible that one may need to step outside of the moment (and into the past or future) in order to pursue the goal, and thus one is not *necessarily* fully in the present (such as predicting future moves of opponent players).

With regard to the high level of concentration necessary for flow, the concentration is not explicitly about maintaining awareness of the present as it is for mindfulness. Rather, flow involves the merging of action and awareness, such that the role of concentration is about applying high levels of skill to meet a high-level challenge, which in turn requires eliminating everything in the present that does not pertain to meeting the high-challenge goal. That is, someone experiencing flow is not open to everything, and is certainly not accepting it nonjudgmentally (on the contrary, the goal-directed nature of flow requires extensive amounts of judgment applied to one's surroundings).

Finally, some conceptions of flow have an autotelic component that entails being intrinsically motivated to pursue the high-level challenge (e.g., Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), which makes flow the only construct of the three to involve intrinsic motivation explicitly. While one might argue that mindfulness is inherently autotelic, the moral/ethical nature of mindfulness gives the pursuit of the endeavor a different bent from the neutrality of both flow and hypnosis (the latter of which does not contain an autotelic component).

### ***Recap***

All three of mindfulness, hypnosis, and flow involve states of deep attention, but each has a key differentiator, as follows:

Mindfulness -- intentional, nonjudgmental awareness of the present; concentration exists to enable nonjudgmental monitoring of one's surroundings in the present; associated with ethically/morally positive constructs like loving kindness; emphasis on the individual being agentic

Hypnosis -- response to suggestion (including perception of automatic responses); concentration exists to exclude the outside environment to yield hyperfocus upon a particular thought, experience, or behavior; ethically/morally neutral

Flow -- pursuing an autotelic, high-challenge goal; concentration exists to maintain awareness of the present and surroundings only insofar as they pertain to the goal, and also to facilitate the application of high skill to meet the challenge; ethically/morally neutral

Just to make this a bit more confusing, one can intentionally direct a trance towards mindfulness, and practicing mindfulness can include a flow experience. But, each of the three constructs has a distinct attentional signature in terms of how concentration and awareness are used to create/facilitate the experience, among other differences.

Not that we can't enjoy all three on a daily basis!

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